



Stranger Things Season 4 by the.painsmokers

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Summary: After the devastation of the Mind Flayer, what's next for Joyce, El, Mike, and the rest of the party? A threat unlike any other looms on the horizon as the gang navigates high school, long distance relationships, and part-time jobs at the Family Video. Old faces return and nothing will ever be the same again. (Spoilers for season 3. Attempts to fit canon as much as possible)

1. Chapter 1: The Voice

Joyce,

If you're reading this, it means something went wrong. Or it means you were snooping through my stuff, but that doesn't really seem like you.

I hope you're not reading this. But if you are, there are a few things I need to say. First, I need to say I'm sorry. It's a lot easier to write that than it is to say it, so I'm writing it. Hopefully you'll never need to hear it. I'm sorry for all the shit you had to go through; I'm sorry for all the shit I put you through. I know you'd laugh it off and just say that's life, but life shouldn't be like that.

The second thing I need to say is thank you. I'm sure you'd ask me what in the world I was thanking you for, and my answer would be long and complicated, so drawn out that eventually you'd forget what you asked me and I'd be spared from answering. But since I don't actually have to say this out loud—well, thank you for helping me climb my way out of the very dark hole I had fallen into. Thank you for never giving up, even when everyone else, including me, had. Thank you for being you.

The third thing I need to say to you is simple. You were right. It's time to leave Hawkins. Get as far away from this place as possible. Put this all behind you, put this behind your family. Take your boys somewhere safe and quiet—somewhere actually safe and quiet, not the pathetic excuse for quiet that this place is.

And when you do leave, please take El with you. I know she won't want to, she'll want to stay here, but you need to get her as far away from this place as possible. There are people watching this town, watching her. And this entire place is a powder-keg of insanity, just waiting to go off. I don't want her to be around when it does. She deserves better than that.

There's a million other little things I'd like to put in here, but who am I kidding? You won't read this, and in a few days, after this all is over, I'll pull it out and burn it, and have a good laugh at myself.

And then with any luck, I'll be taking you to Enzo's right after.

Hopper

...

Joyce Byers stared at the letter in her hands and then looked out the window. She had it practically memorized at this point, but that didn't stop her from reading it multiple times a day. After what had happened under Starcourt, she hadn't known what to do. She had planned to move away, had even put the house up for sale. But then Hopper had made her change her mind, think more about staying in Hawkins. And then Hopper had changed her mind again.

He was gone. He was really gone. Disintegrated with the Russians underneath a goddamn mall of all things. Everyone knew that he died a hero—reportedly saving lives in the burning mall. But no one would ever know just how much of a hero he had been. Just exactly what he had done.

The police, who had gone through Hopper's house to find a will, or anything of the sort, had found the letter hidden in his room, addressed to her. She hadn't shared its contents with anyone, not her sons and not with El. She knew how all of them would have reacted. They would have refused to leave. *We can handle it!* they would have shouted. And they would have been right. But no kid should have to handle things like that. Once was more than enough, let alone the three times it had happened. Putting her own family at risk one more time would have been unthinkable.

And so they had moved.

It had taken some getting used to, and a good deal of family arguments. Jonathan, of course, had been reluctant because of Nancy. Will had been devastated to leave his friends behind. And El...

Joyce had worried that El would just outright refuse to go. The girl was clearly more than capable of handling herself, and on a number of occasions had just vanished entirely. Joyce would not have been surprised had El done the same thing as soon as she heard that she would be moving out of Hawkins with the Byers family.

But that wasn't what had happened. It had been as simple as explaining to the girl that this was what Hopper had wanted for her. El had said nothing, just nodded. And that was all the convincing it had taken.

Now, living in a small town in Pennsylvania called Coyote Hollow, Joyce sometimes wondered if she had made the correct decision. Being so far away from Hawkins made her uncomfortable, especially considering everything that had happened there. It felt like turning your back on someone you knew was dangerous, someone you knew was trying to hurt you. Sure, if you were closer to them, it meant you were more likely to encounter trouble. But it also meant that you could see the trouble coming.

She was still in regular contact with Murray Bauman, the eccentric former reporter who had helped them destroy the Starcourt facility. She wasn't sure what he was up to (mostly because he refused to share any specific details over the phone or via letter), but whatever it was, he claimed it was huge and that she *needed* to stop by at her earliest convenience.

And just how does he expect that to happen? She wondered. She could think of nothing more inconvenient.

"Mom?"

Her thoughts were interrupted by the sound of Jonathan's voice in the doorway. She looked over at him and slipped the paper back into the drawer where it had come from.

"What is it?" she asked, forcing herself to smile. Jonathan was smart, and there were things in that letter that she didn't care to have to explain to him.

"Well, I was just thinking about maybe driving back to Hawkins in a little. It might be nice to spend Christmas there. Nancy already said that I could stay with her family."

Internally, she winced. *He'd rather spend Christmas with her than with us?* But the feeling passed quickly. She remembered what it was like to be that young. And Jonathan didn't mean it like that. He just

missed Nancy.

It wasn't just that. She knew that both her sons and El had been counting on going back for Thanksgiving. But it just hadn't worked out. Both her and Jonathan had been stuck working, unable to call off, because all the other employees at the respective jobs had seniority over them. It had been hugely disappointing to everyone. Secretly, Joyce wondered if she hadn't been slightly relieved. It meant once less tearful goodbye for everyone involved.

"I can't promise anything," she said to her son. His face fell, so she continued speaking quickly. "But I can tell you that I will do everything in my power to make sure we're there."

"You mean it?" he asked.

"I mean it. All of us."

"Thanks, mom," he said, his gratitude obvious in his tone. "And, you know, if it doesn't work out... don't worry, okay? I'm doing great here. I think we all are."

Joyce could only hope that was true.

...

"I miss you too," El said into the phone. The phone received a lot of usage in Byers household. Most of the calls were directed back to Hawkins. If it wasn't Will or Jonathan, it was El, calling Mike. Sometimes Mrs. Byers was in on it too. El wasn't sure who Mrs. Byers was calling, but the conversations were usually hushed. Until Mrs. Byers got annoyed by something the other person was saying. That seemed to happen a lot.

"I still can't believe you couldn't make it down for Thanksgiving," Mike sighed.

"Sorry," said El frowning. "They... had to work."

"I know, I know. It's not your fault anyway. It just sucks, you know? I mean, why did you have to leave Hawkins anyway? You could have lived with me."

El said nothing. Mike knew exactly why.

"I'm sorry," he said, taking his turn to apologize. "That wasn't fair. And I think living with Mrs. Byers is good for you. She's a great mom."

"She really is."

"So... have they come back yet?"

Mike didn't specify what he was talking about, but the implication was clear. Ever since Starcourt, El had lost her otherworldly abilities. Her telekinesis, her far-seeing, all of it was gone. It was like she had burned herself out. She found herself trying to use them, even for the smallest of tasks, extremely often. It was like a part of her was gone. She used to think of them as a curse. Now, they felt like a missing limb.

"Nothing. I can't do anything."

"Well, hold on, El, that's not true! You can do tons of things. You just can't do... those things."

"I'm just like everybody else."

It was a strange feeling. For as long as she could remember, she had wanted to be like everyone else. But now that she was, she found herself wondering what the point was. Who was she now? What was her purpose?

Mike's voice was adamant. "You're not like anyone else I've ever met. You're stronger and smarter and braver—and you put up with me. That's kind of like a superpower on it's own, isn't it?"

El giggled. He always knew what to say, even if what he said was incredibly dorky. She knew that he wasn't like everyone else. He definitely wasn't one of the "cool kids," whatever that meant. But that suited her just fine. She didn't think that she was one of the cool kids either. They seemed boring. And Mike was never boring.

"I just really wish you were here," Mike said. "High school is crazy and it would be a lot better if you were here."

"We could go to school together," El said with a smile. It was a nice thought. It was something that she had never thought she would be able to do before, especially when she was hiding out with Hopper. All of that seemed so long ago now. She still wasn't going to school—Joyce thought it would be best to keep a low profile for just a little longer—but she knew it would be happening soon. In the meantime, she contented herself by reading anything she could get her hands on. And by watching a lot of TV, of course.

"Yeah. We could. It would be awesome." He sighed. "But it's cool. I get why Hopper thought it would be best if you were gone. He was a smart guy."

El smiled sadly to herself. In his own way, Hopper had been smart. He had known how to *get things done*.

"How is the rest of the party?" she asked, wanting to steer the conversation to more pleasant territory. She was still sad about Hopper, but in a way, she thought maybe the sadness wasn't quite so big and painful as it was when everything had happened. And that confused her. Did that mean that she didn't love him as much as she had thought? It had only been a few months. Was she forgetting? The thought scared her, but she could see that everyone else she knew was reacting the same way. Maybe it was normal.

Mike thought for a moment. "Hmm... well, Dustin's been spending a lot of time around Steve. I don't know if that's good or bad. I think it might be better for Steve if I'm being honest. Lucas and Max are dating, which is pretty cool. It means he can't make fun of me and you too much. We still hang out a lot... I even have some classes with them. It's just..."

Mike's voice trailed off. El wondered what was bothering him. "Mike?"

"Sorry. It's just that things don't feel the same anymore. Maybe it's you guys being gone. Maybe it's just high school. I don't really know. I don't like it though. Sometimes I just wish everything could go back to the way it was, you know?"

El did know. But she also knew a thing or two about life. A thing or

two that had been taught to her by a very wise man. A very large man with a large mustache. Her dad. "Everything changes," she said. "That's part of life. It hurt sometimes."

"I... yeah. I mean, yeah. I guess you're right. Say, when did you get so wise?"

El smiled. "Always been that way."

"Yeah, I guess you have."

Their phone conversation, which was taking place in El's bedroom, was interrupted by a knock on the door-frame. El had left her door wide open—there was no reason to have it closed. She looked to see Will standing in the door.

"Hey, El," he said. "I have some news you might want to hear. And... oh, are you talking to Mike?"

She nodded.

"Tell him I said hi!"

"Will says hi," El relayed into the phone.

"Oh! Hi, Will! What's up?" Mike said, even though there was no way that Will could possibly hear him. Sometimes El still didn't understand certain conventions.

"He says he has news," El said, still looking at Will with interest. She had known him for less time than the rest of the original party, owing to his time spent trapped in the Upside Down. But after living with him for a few months, she felt closer to him than ever. He was a good friend... and a great brother.

"Yeah!" Will said, his voice excited. "Jonathan just told me we're going back to Hawkins for Christmas!"

El dropped the phone in her excitement, jumping off her bed and hopping up and down, running towards Will and giving him a hug. "We're going home!"

On the other end of the line, Mike was very confused. "El? El? What's going on?"

...

"Yeah, listen, man, I don't know," Steve said. "I just work here. You want a good movie? Uh. Check out those ones. They're new." He pointed at a long shelf in the front of the Family Video.

The customer, a teenager, probably no older than Dustin or his dorky friends, looked at Steve in disgust. "What do you even *do* here?"

"Serve mongoloids like you," huffed Steve under his breath.

"What?"

"Nothing. Anyway, those are the new ones."

The customer—the kid—walked away from the counter. Steve sighed in relief. He didn't know why he let Robin talk him into working here. He supposed that he didn't really have too much of a choice. Not too many places were willing to hire someone who was pretty much known all around town for being a complete tool.

They don't really know me though.

It was funny how fast you grew up. And speaking of growing up—

The bell above the door jingled as another teenager walked in. This one, though, Steve knew.

"Dustin, dude, what's going on?"

Dustin marched up to the counter with his head down, nervously looking around the store like someone else might be watching. He was a cool kid, but... well, he could be weird. Like, really weird.

"Steve, something's up."

"Yeah, like what? My chances of going down in history as Hawkins greatest failure? Spit it out, man."

Dustin looked up at Steve and Steve saw that his younger friend's eyes were red. Like he had been crying. And he looked afraid.

"Woah. Wait. What's going on?"

Dustin shook his head. "Can I talk to you in private?"

Steve looked around. "I mean, it's pretty private. There's no one—"

"*Private*, Steve!"

"Okay, okay, jeez! Come to the back room." Steve stepped out from behind the counter, then hesitated. "Hey kid, don't steal anything."

The customer, who was already heading for the front door, said, "There's nothing worth stealing in this shitty place anyway."

Steve shook his head. They didn't make them like they used to.

"Alright, calm down. What's going on? And have you been crying? What did we say about that?"

"Suzie told me she likes that I'm in touch with my emotions."

"Dude."

"And anyway, that's not the point! Something *big* is going down."

Steve scratched the back of his head. He wasn't sure if he was ready for anymore big. "Like what?"

"Like Starcourt."

"That's what I was afraid of. Can you please slow yourself down for just a minute to explain? Please?"

"It would be way easier if I just showed you. It's not so much something you can explain as much as it's something you can feel."

Steve sighed. "Dustin, are you telling me that you came here over a feeling?"

"Have my feelings *ever* been wrong?"

Steve blinked. "I honestly don't think I know the answer to that. Maybe?"

"Dammit, I thought I could trust you!"

Steve put his hands up. "Okay, okay, hold on. You know I can't go anywhere right now. I'm working. So just try to tell me."

"Okay. Okay. Fine. But if it comes out wrong, it's because I am *under stress* right now!" Dustin heaved a deep breath. "I was biking downtown because I wanted ice cream. I was going to get some for me, Lucas, and Max—"

"Come on, really? That place isn't even a fraction as good as Scoops Ahoy. And who even wants ice cream in December?"

"I do! And you asked me to talk, so listen!"

Steve sat down heavily in one of the plastic chairs in the tiny break room and waved his hand, indicating for Dustin to continue.

"You know the alley behind it? The one that runs perpendicular to Grape Street? Okay, so I heard something weird from back there. At first I thought it was just some homeless person digging through a trash can. But then I remembered that Hawkins doesn't actually *have* any homeless people. So I went to check it out."

"What did it sound like?"

Dustin thought for a moment. "Hmmm. Kind of like... a tearing noise? But less like paper and more like sheet metal?"

"And you thought it was a homeless person?"

"It was coming from an alley!"

Steve shook his head. "I don't even know where to start with that. But never mind. Keep it going."

"So I popped into the alley, I just wanted to get a look. I've had a lot of experience saving the town, as I'm sure you're aware. I walked down the alley, turned *right* where I heard the noise... and you will

never believe what I saw."

"What?" asked Steve, curious to hear the answer despite himself.

"Nothing. I didn't see anything."

Steve let his shoulders slump. "You dragged me back here, while I was working, to tell me that nothing happened? And you cried because of it?"

"No," Dustin said. "You didn't let me finish telling you the story. I didn't see anything. But I felt something. It was like the most awful feeling you could possibly imagine. Like someone told you your whole family died, and that everything you had ever owned was gone, and that your house had burned down, and also that you would never feel happy again."

Steve blinked. "Dustin, are you depressed?"

"What? No! I'm telling you, Steve, I really felt this. I came here right after. It took awhile for me to shake the feeling... but what if it's the Mind Flayer?"

Steve suddenly understood. Dustin probably hadn't heard anything at all. He was just terrified of the possibility that the horror that had nearly killed them just a few months ago could come back.

"You know that's not possible, right? The gate closed. Forever. It can't open again. El told us that."

"The list of things we actually know about that place is so small that it doesn't even exist! *What if it opens again?* And El's not here to stop it?"

Steve stood up from the chair. This was a problem he would have to deal with at another time. "Look, I'm sorry that happened. We'll talk about this later. If you want, I can even go check it out with you. But right now I've got to get back to work. Why don't you talk to Lucas and Max about it? You were going to see them, right?"

"I was afraid they'd think I was crazy."

Steve winced because he had just done exactly that. "We'll sort it out. For right now, why don't you go get ice cream for real this time, and stay out of strange alleys while you're doing it. That might make a difference." It felt like a half-measure, but Steve wasn't sure what else to do. Maybe he could go there later with Robin and Dustin, just to reassure the kid that nothing was actually wrong.

"You're not crazy. I don't think anyone would blame you for feeling that way."

Dustin looked at Steve with mild confusion. "When did you get so wise?"

Steve thought about it. "Probably when I accidentally adopted a few teenagers."

...

Somewhere, buried deep in Russia, a few scientists were huddled in urgent conversation. The exact meaning of the conversation was difficult to make out from anyone who might have overheard it, mostly due to the strange nature of it and the odd words that they were using.

There was a lot of talk about doorways, and unblinking eyes. They discussed a certain American a few times, including what value he could possibly have. Why were they still keeping him alive? He was more trouble than he could possibly be worth, wasn't he?

The reason for their hushed conversation was because they were not alone. The massive, imposing facility that they were currently inhabiting was occupied not only by men of science, but by men of war as well. They had... encouraged the scientists to push forward with the research, using methods that were sometimes less than polite. The scientists that were currently talking to one another wished to be able to avoid any future encouragements. Once was enough.

"I don't like him," hissed one in Russian. "He needs to go!"

"And what do you suggest we do?" asked another, sarcasm heavy on

his voice. "Shoot him in the head? Not so much our style, is it now?"

"He has been the cause of too much! We cannot keep him here any longer!"

"We will keep him here until the exact moment we are told not to. And then, if we're lucky, we'll still be alive."

...

Far away, safe in her new home in Coyote Hollow, El dreamed. She didn't dream Russians or nightmarish facilities. Instead, she dreamed of something that she had dreamed about a few times since moving to Pennsylvania. She dreamed about a voice.

In the dream, everything was dark. The ground beneath her was water, but solid, cool on her feet, just like the ground whenever she went into her head-space to see someone far away. But it was not the same place. She could tell that just by the feeling it gave her as she was there.

"Hello?" she said, her voice shockingly loud in the utter silence.

"Hello," came the reply. It was neither male nor female. It was neither good nor bad. It simply was.

"Who are you?" she asked.

"Am I?" the voice responded.

El frowned. That wasn't an answer. What confused her more was her lack of certainty of whether or not any of this was happening. Was it a dream? Was it something more? Was it possible her powers were returning?

"Where am I?" she asked.

The voice said something then, but she didn't understand it. It was a word she had never heard before, using sounds that the human mouth could not possibly make. It hurt her to hear it.

Her face clenched and her hand went involuntarily to her nose. She

wiped it and felt a warm wetness. "Please don't do that," she said. "It hurts me."

"Hurt? What is hurt to you? You do not know what hurt is."

El felt very small indeed. The voice seemed to come from everywhere and seemed to speak with great assurance that every word it uttered was fact. Even so, this time she knew it was wrong.

"I do know what hurt is," she said. "Hurt is losing the people you love."

The voice said nothing. Or maybe it did say something, just something she couldn't hear. In any case, El felt that hurt very powerfully. It felt like an ache in her chest. She thought of Hopper. The man who could have been her father forever. She thought about her mama. The woman she would never truly know. She thought about Mike, who was so far away now. She wondered if he would always feel the same way about her.

Maybe he won't like me anymore. Maybe too much time has passed. Maybe he's found someone else... maybe...

"What are you doing to me?" she asked, and her voice trembled.

"Nothing," was the reply. "You all do it to yourselves. Every time."

When she awoke, her face was stained with tears. Her pillow was stained with blood.

2. Chapter 2: The Reunion

(Author's Note: Thank you to anyone who took the time to read and subscribe! If you have any thoughts, questions, or concerns feel free to leave a comment.)

"El!"

Mike couldn't contain himself any longer as his girlfriend stepped out of the car door in front of the Wheeler house. He had told himself that he was going to play it cool, have some dignity in front of his friends—and Mrs. Byers, of course. But as soon as he saw her, all those plans went right out the window. He ran up to her and wrapped her in a massive hug, pulling her close to him.

"I missed you so much," El said. "Not being able to see you from faraway was so hard."

Mike separated himself from her for a moment to laugh. "Now you know how I felt *all the time!*"

She kissed him then, because the truth was that if he hadn't come running up to her, she would have gone running down to him.

Mrs. Byers cleared her throat, but it was only half-heartedly. She had tried, at first, to fill in Hopper's shoes as the tough voice of discipline. It just didn't work out. She wasn't cut out for that sort of thing, and everyone knew it.

"Jeez, Mike, I hope you don't greet all of us like that," Will said.

"Nah," said Mike, giving his buddy a hug. "I missed you too!"

Lucas, Max, and Dustin approached now as well. Mike stood with his arm around El, wanting to keep her as close to him as possible. "Damn, Byers, it's been awhile! You didn't go and get yourself a new party, did you?" asked Lucas.

"You already know the answer to that," said Will. "It's good to see you."

Will looked to Jonathan, knowing that his brother would doubtless be excited to see Nancy. But Jonathan was no longer standing where he had been just a minute before. Will could see over Mike's shoulder both Nancy and Jonathan walking into the Wheeler's house. Will tried to contain a smile and mostly failed.

Mrs. Byers gave a small wave to everyone. "I'll be seeing you all later! I'll stop by to pick everyone up, don't worry about that. Say hi to your parents for me, Mike, won't you? And El, remember—"

"Three inches," said El solemnly, looking at Mike with great seriousness.

The two of them burst into laughter.

"Three inches," confirmed Mrs. Byers, a small smile on her face as she got back into the car. "Have a nice time!"

Dustin threw up his arms as Mrs. Byers drove away. "We're back in business, boys!"

Max gave him a small glare. "And girls."

Dustin looked mildly insulted. "It's a figure of speech. Sheesh. I'd never forget about you guys."

"You better not," glowered Max, before her face broke out into a smile too. "Come here, El!"

Max gave El a huge hug. "You doing okay all the way out there in Pennsylvania? I bet it feels totally different from Hawkins."

"Not so different," El said with a shrug. "But it's okay. Will and Jonathan are good brothers though. I just miss you all."

"We miss you too," said Lucas.

Mike felt a wave of relief. He was so glad that all of his friends had eventually chosen to accept El. It had been a rocky start, of course, but after everything the group had gone through together it was hard to imagine anything different. The same was true for Max, but in reverse. Everyone else had accepted her except Mike. All because she

wasn't El. It had been a hard lesson to learn, but he had gotten it into his head eventually.

"This feels right," said Mike. "Everything feels the way it's supposed to."

"I'm home," said El, looking at Mike. "Hawkins will always be home."

...

Once they were down in Mike's basement, things really did feel the way they used to. Max was yelling at Lucas for... something, El was sitting close to Mike and observing the chaos. Dustin was trying *very* hard to tell a story, and Will was paging through one of Mike's magazines. No doubt looking for inspiration. Since he had stopped playing D&D, he had begun to write, channeling his creative energies into a different medium. He seemed more serious, more thoughtful. Mike wasn't sure how he felt about it yet, but he knew he would support his friend no matter what.

"Listen, stalker, just because you're my boyfriend doesn't mean you can just *stare* at me whenever you want," she said. "I'm way more than just a pretty face."

Lucas was exasperated. "First of all, uh, yes, it does mean that. Second of all, stop calling me that, I'm literally your boyfriend, how could I possibly be a stalker? And thirdly... okay, yes, you are way more than a pretty face. Can't argue that."

Mike rolled his eyes. Some things would never change, even though everything else felt like it was. It was reassuring to find some sense of permanence in a world of his that was moving way too fast.

"So how did you convince your mother to get you here so early before Christmas? You're missing school, right?" Mike asked Will.

Will shrugged. "Yeah, but she seemed desperate to come down here too, honestly. I think she was a little homesick. And it's not like my grades were suffering. Plus her and Jonathan managed to get the time off after the Thanksgiving fiasco."

El shuddered at the thought of the Thanksgiving fiasco. The house

had been loud and full of anger for that one. Anger directed at the employers of both Jonathan and Mrs. Byers.

"Well, whatever the reason, we're glad you're here now," said Dustin. "Will you all listen to what I have to say now?"

Lucas rolled his eyes. "Hang on, let me quick go to the concession stand and get my popcorn. Earth to Dustin! I heard this story already. Robin told me when I went to Family Video with Max!"

Dustin feigned shock. "Oh! You heard it already? Well, then, why bother telling it again? It's not like there's anyone else in the room who needs to hear it!"

"No," said Max, "I think there are some people in the room that definitely do *not* need to hear it. Can't we just enjoy ourselves?"

"What happened?" asked Mike. "Is everything okay?" He had a sudden bad feeling. It had something to do with the way Max was looking at El. And with Dustin's urge to tell whatever the story was.

Lucas sat down heavily next to Max. "Yeah. Everything is fine. Dustin just has a boring story in which literally *nothing* happened. If you want to have a good time, that is not the way to do it."

"I want to hear it," said El, surprising Mike. "What happened?"

The next few minutes were spend with Dustin retelling the same story that he had told Steve—the story of the odd sound, the terrible feeling, and the empty alleyway. Or, more accurately, almost the same story. Because this time there was a second part to it—the part where Steve and Dustin went to check it out afterwards.

"So we were just walking there, you know, me and Steve—"

"We get it, you're friends with Steve Harrington," said Lucas. "Please continue."

"Did you hear the noise again?" asked Will.

Dustin looked at the ground, defeat on his face. "No. We didn't hear anything. And we didn't feel anything either. It was like nothing had

ever happened."

"Because nothing *did* happen!" exploded Lucas. "I'm sorry, man, but that's it! End of story!"

The party looked at each other awkwardly. No one wanted to be the one to tell Dustin he was crazy. Luckily Lucas seemed to have no problem doing just that.

"What if it did happen?" said El, breaking the silence. Her voice was quiet and everyone's eyes were on her. "I've seen things you people wouldn't believe."

"What?" asked Dustin, confused.

Mike jumped in to explain. "It's a line from Blade Runner. It's like her favorite movie... for some reason. I guess Jonathan got a copy and let her watch it. I watched it on my own and thought it was boring. Guess we can't agree on everything, huh?" He tried to smile at his girlfriend, but she wasn't even looking at him.

"Everything is possible," she said. "I believe you, Dustin."

"Thanks, El," Dustin said, his grin wide and still partially toothless. "I knew you'd have my back."

"She quotes a movie and we're supposed to enter panic mode?" said Lucas. "I don't think that's a good idea."

Mike knew he was supposed to defend his girlfriend, but he didn't know if he really agreed with her. Even so, she made a good point. "Well, hold on. I think it's at least worth thinking about. I mean, with everything that we've seen, who's to say what's possible or impossible?"

"The facts," grumbled Max. "The gate was closed. That's it."

Mike didn't know what to say to that. But he did know that even though he wanted to defend El, she didn't need any help defending herself. She was more than capable of handling whatever she needed to, especially if it was just a discussion between friends.

El didn't say anything after that, but she still looked troubled. Maybe it was because she still wasn't the best at articulating her thoughts. Or maybe it was because she was keeping something a secret. That didn't sound like her though. According to her, friends didn't lie, and she considered keeping a secret no better than telling a lie.

The party sat in uncomfortable silence for a moment. Then Lucas sighed and stood up, approaching Dustin on the other side of the room. Lucas extended his hand. "I'm sorry, man. I shouldn't have said it like that. I don't think you're making stuff up. Maybe we're all just a little bit... tense after everything that happened."

Dustin shook Lucas' hand with gratitude. "I get it," he said. "And I know what it sounds like, believe me. I just think it's worth considering, that's all."

Mike took one last glance at El. She was frowning slightly, so slightly in fact, that it was unlikely that anyone else would notice. But he did. He made a mental note to ask her about it later, when they were alone.

...

He didn't have too long to wait. They all stayed together in the basement for a little longer, talking, and laughing, and it almost felt like the old days. Mike was amazed at how much of a difference a few months could make. His mother had always told him that when he went to high school, things were going to really change, but he had never quite believed her until now. Sure, he still saw Lucas, Dustin, and Max every day. But Will and El being so far away had an effect as well.

"We're going to go for a walk," Mike said once the conversation died down for a moment. "We'll be back in a little."

Lucas and Dustin made mocking kissy faces at Mike and El. El giggled and Mike rolled his eyes. "Real mature of you," he said. "Definitely high school behavior."

They looked at each other and shrugged. Mike wasn't really annoyed. He had come to expect and even appreciate their friendly ribbing,

now that they all accepted El.

Once they were outside, Mike took El's hand as they walked. She was looking around at the town of Hawkins with an expression of joy on her face, like she couldn't believe she was back. Mike admired her positive outlook. For someone who had been through so much, she somehow managed to always keep her head up.

"How have you been?" he asked. He already knew what she was going to say. He asked anyway.

"Good," she said, looking at him with mild confusion. "You... knew that already, right?"

Mike shook his head. "No, I don't mean it like that. How have you really been? With... Hopper. With being in a new place. Are you okay?"

She looked away, refusing to meet his eyes. That was the only answer he needed, but he knew it meant she didn't want to tell him right now. He worried that the reason she didn't want to talk to him about it was because she felt like she couldn't trust him. *Am I a bad boyfriend? Or worse, a bad friend?*

Why couldn't there just be a manual for this sort of thing? It would make everything so much easier!

"Well... what's it like being back? How does it feel?"

"It feels nice," she said, looking up at the sky. The sun was just starting to set, and the late fall evening sun was turning their surroundings the color of dying embers. "It feels the way it's supposed to."

He squeezed her hand and nodded. "Is it as good as you remember?"

"Better," she said, and the way she looked at him made him think that she wasn't just talking about the town. He couldn't stop himself from blushing slightly.

"But you know that if anything was wrong, you could tell me, right? No matter what. I'm here for you. We all are. Even if it isn't me, even

if you want to talk to Max or someone..."

"Thank you, Mike," El said. "Nothing is wrong."

Mike didn't know what to do. He wasn't used to feeling helpless like this. He knew something was bothering her, but for whatever reason, she seemed entirely unwilling to discuss it with him. Or with anyone. At the very least, she had to be hurting from losing Hopper. It still hurt Mike sometimes to think about, and it couldn't really be said that he was ever on the best of terms with the chief of police.

And then it hit him. That was the answer.

Mike stopped walking. El looked at him, confused. "What's wrong?"

"I don't know if anything is wrong. But I know how I feel. And I feel sad. I'm *not* okay, El. I don't think any of us are. I think if we were okay, then we would probably have to start worrying. We've all seen and done things that no one our age should have to do. And I miss Hopper every single day. It hurts just to remember him, you know, stupid little things. Like the way he used to scream at us. Remember how red his face would get? And then I end up laughing until I cry, but sometimes I don't know if I'm crying because I'm laughing or if I'm crying because I'm sad."

El's lip was trembling and Mike thought that there was a chance that he was getting through to her. "I still can't even imagine what it felt like to you—what everything feels like to you. I was never able to do the sort of things that you could do, and I didn't know Hopper the way you did. But I know that you're hurting. Because we all are, some way or another. And that's okay. It's okay to feel that way. That's how we know we're human."

"Am I?" El asked, her voice barely a whisper. "What am I really?"

"You're El. You're Jane. You're whoever you want to be, and that's a question only you can answer. I used to think that it was my job to keep you safe from everything. You showed me I don't have to do that anymore. And that doesn't just mean from physical danger. That's from things like this too."

"Mike..." El said, her voice wavering even harder.

"What is it?"

"I miss him so much. I miss you. I miss the town. I miss the party. I miss my powers. I miss the way things used to be. And... I miss having a normal life. Can you miss something you never had? All I do is miss things and it makes me feel like there's no point. To any of this. Do you understand?"

Mike nodded, a lump in his throat. He did, if not to the same extent as her.

"I have these dreams. And they *hurt*, Mike. I hear a voice talking to me, and it's telling me I don't know what pain is. But I *do*. Loss is pain. I try every day to see Hopper. I can't see anything anymore. It's just gone. I feel blind."

Mike pulled his girlfriend close. "We're going to figure all of this out, El. I swear."

"I know. We can do anything."

Mike's heart swelled with pride. Not pride about himself, but pride about the party. Pride at what his friends had accomplished. Yes, they had suffered losses. But those losses had bought them victories as well. They had saved the lives of everyone in the world. Now they needed to see if they could make sense of their own lives as well. *One small step at a time*, Mike thought.

...

That night, they let El pick the movie they would watch. Mike had a feeling he knew what she was going to pick, which would be a problem, because it was rated R. Luckily, they didn't have to work very hard to convince Jonathan to go pick it up for them.

"Seriously?" he said. "You guys want to watch that? I mean, I think that's awesome, but..."

"It was El's idea," said Mike. "We let her pick."

Jonathan had shrugged. "Yeah, I'll be right back. My treat."

He had returned a half hour later with a copy of *Blade Runner* on VHS. "Just make sure you rewind, alright? I don't want to have to pay the rewind fee later."

"Thanks, Jonathan!" El beamed.

"Glad to see someone taking an interest in real art," he said with a wink. "Just don't mention to Nancy that I was the one who rented it for you, okay? She'd have my head."

El mimed locking her lips shut. Jonathan gave her a thumbs-up and headed back upstairs.

"So what's this movie about, anyway?" asked Lucas.

"Um," said El. "It's hard to explain."

"Only one way to find out," Max said, taking the tape from El and popping it into the VCR. "Let's see."

...

"...what did we just watch?" groaned Lucas. "Is it over? El, you're never picking the movie again. I forbid it."

"You didn't like it?" asked El, her voice disappointed. "But..."

Max shook her head. "Don't listen to him. He wouldn't know a good movie if he was the lead actor. That was brilliant, El! I can totally see why you love it so much."

"It was *so slow*," continued Lucas. "And that soundtrack? What was that?"

"It was a deep examination of what it means to be human!" said Max. "Maybe if you were interested in more than space battles and sword fights, you could appreciate a little culture. So... what do you think? Do you think Deckard is a replicant?"

"Wait," said Dustin. "You mean the main character? He's a robot?"

Max sighed, annoyed and disappointed. "They aren't robots, dingus. They're androids. So close to human that sometimes they can't even tell the difference. And if you were paying attention, you'd have seen that they dropped tons of hints."

"I don't know," said El, thoughtfully. "I think... it doesn't matter."

Max frowned but then nodded. "You're right. It doesn't matter, does it? He has a conscience and he can love. He misses the past but looks forward to the future. What's more human than that?"

In that moment, Mike understood why El loved the movie so much. The replicants, the androids in the movie that spent so much time trying to find a way to stay alive, wondering if they had souls, if they really were "human," whatever that meant—they faced the same conundrum that she had admitted to him.

"Damn," said Lucas. "It's like you're a bigger nerd than all of us. Combined!"

Max swatted at Lucas' head. He ducked, trying not to grin and failing.

Mike watched El. She looked happy, and that filled him with Hope. He was glad that she had friends like Max. He understood that now. As much as he wanted to be the one that she could rely on, he couldn't always take that spot. It wasn't fair to her. She needed to be able to branch out and make her own decisions.

Maybe we can figure this out. Maybe everything will be okay.

...

Joyce Byers never came to pick up her family that night. Instead, she made a phone call to the Wheeler household, asking Karen if it would be okay if the kids slept over. Karen had agreed immediately. She didn't see any issue with it and figured that the kids would be delighted to hear the news. When Karen asked Joyce if everything was okay, Joyce told her that, yes, of course everything was fine. She had just got caught up with some paperwork involving the sale of her house and was going to be busy for the majority of the night.

That wasn't true. There was no paperwork for the sale of her house

because the sale had been taken care of shortly after they had moved. Instead, Joyce was meeting someone outside of Hawkins, and had needed to drive almost three hours to get there. She had tried desperately to convince the person in question to meet somewhere, anywhere closer, using her kids as the reason, but he had refused.

Murray Bauman was often like that.

She didn't understand why he lived the way he did. She didn't understand his seclusion or his paranoia, but she had to admit that he had been quite useful in a number of circumstances. In fact, he had been instrumental in saving the town from the Mind Flayer. So she figured she could give him his privacy. And eccentricities.

When she arrived, it was already getting late. She knocked on the door and heard the sound of the microphone next to her clicking on.

"Look into the camera," came Bauman's already irritated voice.

"It's me, Murray. Let me in," she said, feeling annoyed.

"The. Camera. Now!"

She sighed and looked. Into the camera, not the microphone, as she had mistakenly done the previous time. The door clicked open.

"Proceed."

She did as she was told. On the inside, it looked exactly like how she remembered it. Chaotic, but with just enough order that the person who had cast all the papers and books and charts and research around could find what they were looking for.

"Jesus, Murray. You knew I was on my way. Is that really necessary anymore?"

Bauman came slouching out of the room he used as an office, wearing what looked like his pajamas. He hadn't changed at all. If anything, she thought he looked a little more manic than before.

"Yes," he said. "It is necessary. It is especially necessary because we tangled with *goddamn Russian soldiers in a secret underground base!* So

yes! I will use all the security I can get my hands on!"

"No one knows that was us, come on now," said Joyce. She knew it was a battle that she was not going to win. Murray was just too set in his ways.

He put up his hands. "Not gonna argue this. But where you're rotting in a Russian gulag, do not call me for help. Because I will be sitting here, in comfort, hidden behind my 'unnecessary' security."

"Fair enough," said Joyce. "Now what was so important that I needed to drive all the way out here from Pennsylvania?"

"Please, have a seat. Would you like some tea? I hope not, because I am all out. So just sit and listen, because I am about to blow your mind."

Joyce shifted some papers out of the way and sat down on the couch. Murray took up a position opposite her in a recliner. He put his feet up and crossed his arms, appearing to be thinking. He said nothing.

"Yes...?" she said.

"So. There's a lot I need to tell you, but I think I'll lead with this. There's a damn good reason why my security is so tight and it is directly related to something I think you're going to care very much about."

Joyce didn't say anything. She was tired of prompting him. If he was going to drag this out, let him. She wouldn't give him the satisfaction of seeing that he had annoyed her.

"After our friend Alexei didn't make it, I started thinking. What had happened to everyone who had worked in that facility? Well, they were either dead or in US custody, which meant as good as dead to their comrades back home. But what if one of them made it out? And what if not only did they make it out, but they managed to integrate themselves into American society? It would be an amazing windfall for the Ruskis. But it would also be extremely dangerous for that agent... so dangerous, that they could barely ever risk communication, especially with how hard it is to make contact

overseas."

Joyce looked at Bauman blankly. "What? Do you know someone who made it out?" If he did, then that meant someone might know that they had been involved—that her family had been involved!

"No. I don't think anyone made it out. Don't you see? I'm that guy! I'm the one who made it out."

Joyce did see, but the implication was a little terrifying. "You're pretending to be a Russian agent to get information out of them? Are you serious?"

"Deadly serious. Don't sound so incredulous! You heard my Russian, it's perfect. They don't suspect a thing."

"So what's the goal? What do you think you're going to learn?"

"So that's the thing. It's not what I'm going to learn. It's what I already did learn." He leaned forward. "They have someone in captivity."

"They do? Of course they do. They're Russians! That's what they do, they take people prisoner, and, and... I don't know, do experiments." Joyce realized that she didn't know what it was that the Russians did, just that they were dangerous and evil.

"No," said Bauman. "It's not just some prisoner. It's someone from here. Someone who was involved in the gate."

Joyce shook her head. "That's impossible. They're all dead. All the Russians died and the only Americans who were involved are all right here."

"It's an American," said Bauman. "They haven't said the name, but they did say that much. And you're wrong, you know. Not every American who was involved with that made it out of Starcourt alive. There was someone who didn't get to leave. Someone who had to sacrifice their own life—or so we thought—so that the rest of us could do the job we needed to do."

Joyce's breath caught in her throat as she realized who Bauman was talking about. It was impossible, of course. It was nothing more than

false hope, something she had not allowed herself the luxury of. She had come to firmly inhabit the reality of her situation, that she would not see the man she had grown so fond of ever again.

But who else could it be?

Hopper.

...

The American sat in his cell, thinking about his predicament. He knew what he needed to do, but for how clever he was, he couldn't think of a way to accomplish it. He had been so close, had nearly accomplished exactly what it was that he had set out to do... and he had failed.

The irony of it was not lost on him. He had gotten so far, had done so much, only to have it all ripped away from him at the last second. Everything he had been working towards... gone in the blink of an eye. There was only one person to blame for it.

Himself.

The next time, he would be smarter. He would be more careful. He would use all of his new knowledge and he would not let himself be stopped by anything.

He could hear the guards outside of his cell. His Russian was weak, but all the time spent in captivity combined with the few of them who would speak English to him meant that he had picked up on a few things. Gates were opening, but not just in Hawkins. They were opening all across the world. This time, though, the gates weren't the same. There was something different about them.

The American knew what was different, even though he couldn't understand what the Russians were saying. He supposed that he could have told them, but why in the world would he do that? Let them figure it out on their own. Soon they would see, and they would regret what they had done.

...

El slept soundly that night. Karen hadn't seen anything wrong with letting all the kids have a sleepover in the basement together. It wasn't like anything... untoward would happen, if they were all there.

And so El and Mike were curled up together on top of a large sleeping bag, and El was sleeping peacefully for what felt like the first time in too long. The rest of the party was sleeping too, but even if they had been awake, they still wouldn't have been able to see that they were being watched.

It wasn't by anyone or anything in the room. It wasn't by anything that they could have seen with their own eyes. But it was happening nonetheless.

There were two people in the room in particular that the watcher was observing. Will Byers and Eleven, sometimes called Jane. Will was a changeling, someone who had been caught between two worlds and had been changed as a result. Eleven was a ticking time bomb, someone who had managed to tap into the very fabric of the universe to alter the world around her. Yes, her powers were gone... but that made her no less dangerous.

The watching would continue until the early hours of the morning. El hardly stirred, sleeping like a rock. When the morning came and she awoke next Mike, she smiled for two reasons. First, because the sight of him still made her so happy. And second... because she hadn't had a single dream.

3. Chapter 3: The Assault

Joyce stopped to pick up the kids early the next morning. No one was ready to leave—in fact, Jonathan told her that he was going to be going for a drive with Nancy, hopefully to go on a hike. Joyce had shrugged, knowing better than to argue with her oldest son when it came to the subject of his girlfriend.

"Why do we have to go?" asked Will. "Couldn't we spend more time with them?"

"Because I'd love to spend some time with *my* family now," said Joyce. "The hotel was lonely without anyone else there!"

El hadn't argued. She knew that they would be back later, more than likely that very night. And she had gotten to sleep cuddled up next to Mike, and there had been no bad dreams! She was in a great mood and had no desire to start any kind of trouble.

She also noticed that Mrs. Byers was acting... strange. She seemed nervous and excited at the same time, like there was something she wanted to say but couldn't say it in front of everyone. It gave El an uncomfortable feeling. She wasn't sure what to say, so she chose to say nothing. Mrs. Byers would tell them soon enough—if El knew anything about her adopted mother, it was that she was terrible at keeping secrets from the kids.

Actually, Mrs. Byers had asked El to stop calling her Mrs. Byers for a long time. El had tried out "Joyce," but that just didn't seem right. She called her "mom" sometimes, but more often than not, El just didn't call Mrs. Byers anything. They were in an awkward time, El knew. It was a time of transition and a time of sadness.

El thought back to Hopper's funeral. There had been no body to show, the Russian's machine had seen to that. El had cried silently for the first half, until her tears had all run out and she couldn't do anything other than silently heave her shoulders. She had cried until her eyes had burned. She still did not know how to come to terms with the fact she would never see him again. The man who had been so strong, so sure, so safe—gone, forever. The idea of death confused

her. What happened when you died? How could someone just no longer exist? She understood the science behind it, of course. But emotionally, she didn't know how to deal with the thought that Hopper would never call her "kid" again, would never make her an Eggo Extravaganza, and would never protect people in the way he was so good at.

El's talk with Mike had made her feel a little better. She was tired of always pretending that she was fine, even when she wasn't. It just felt like everyone else was doing such a good job of processing their trauma, and she was stuck feeling like there was a knife stuck into her ribs. Until Mike had told her how he felt, and the weight of the world slid off her shoulders. It was okay to not be okay.

"Um, Mom?" asked Will. "Where are we going?"

"Hmm," said Joyce. "That's the thing. Nowhere special. Just some awful hotel. I needed to get you guys out of the Wheeler house and back to someone that you really need to talk to."

"Who?" Will asked, confused. "What are you talking about? Where's Jonathan?"

"I didn't want to make a scene. This is supposed to be pretty secret. I'll tell him later."

"What are you talking about?"

Joyce looked back at the two kids in the rearview mirror, her eyes full of worry. "There's something we really need to talk about. And it's going to be confusing at first. But I think it's going to be a good thing overall."

"Why can't you just tell us now?" asked Will.

"I can't say anything, sweetie, I'm sorry. Just wait a little longer and everything will make sense."

El stared out the window and watched the houses rush by. She knew there wouldn't be any other answers for now.

...

"You know what I think is really frustrating?" said Mike, kicking a rock down the road.

"Hit me with it," said Dustin.

"The fact the El had to leave her. I mean, okay, it might be dangerous for her to stay. But then she comes back just a few months later? How does that make any difference?"

Lucas kicked the stone back to Mike. "Stopping by and visiting is a little different than just straight-up living here, though, you know that, right?"

"I know. I'm just thinking. I mean, if Russians were watching the town, they'd have seen her come back in, wouldn't they? And then we'd all be in trouble."

Max scoffed. "If I didn't know any better, I'd think that you were *trying* to get into trouble."

Mike put his hands up. "No, no trouble for me. High school is enough trouble. I just... well, you know. I miss El. And now she's back and Mrs. Byers just whisks them away? You don't see anything weird there?"

"I think you might be grasping at straws here a little," said Dustin. "Not everything has to be a grand conspiracy. We're allowed to be regular kids sometimes."

"Uh, weren't you the one saying you discovered something impossible?" asked Mike.

Dustin was adamant. "That's because I did. It wasn't speculation—I saw it! Or, felt it, I guess, but still..." His voice trailed off when he realized that he wasn't doing himself any favors by continuing to speak.

Lucas was the one who jumped in to defend Dustin, which came as a surprise, though it might have been due to the fact that Lucas still felt guilty after snapping at Dustin last night. "No one is saying anyone is wrong. Just maybe that Mrs. Byers wanted to spend some time with her kids. She's probably under a lot of stress, with Hopper being..."

you know. And El living with her now."

Mike relented. He supposed that they were right, that nothing was out of the ordinary. It was just so hard to adjust to the idea that the world might not end at any given moment. "Yeah, you might be right. Still though, I hope they come back soon. It's not like El can come to school with us on Monday."

"Why not?" asked Max. "Just say she's visiting."

Dustin and Lucas looked at each other. "We kinda already did that..." said Lucas.

"Yeah? So?" asked Max.

Dustin mumbled, "We sorta said she was Mike's cousin? So that's weird."

Max bust out laughing. "And then I guess it'd be strange if they were sucking face in the hallway, yeah."

Mike was fire-engine red and defensive. "Hold on! She had a wig on and there's no way anyone remembers that! We even went to the Snow Ball together and no one said anything, remember?"

"You took your cousin to the Snow Ball?" teased Max.

Mike groaned. The sooner they got to Family Video to return Blade Runner, the better. He couldn't take much more of this.

...

As soon as the Byers family had reentered the town, the Russians had known about it. Because they were dedicated to cracking the mystery of what had happened in Hawkins, and a minor setback like the complete destruction of all their work was not going to hold them back.

Unfortunately for the Russians, none of them were terribly competent or knowledgeable in the area of surveillance of American targets. In the utter chaos that had ensued when Starcourt had been destroyed, every single Russian soldier and scientist had either died or been

taken into captivity. That meant there was no one to accurately report on what had happened or to pick up the pieces. The top military R&D brass had sent over what amounted to a skeleton crew: a group of soldiers who had nothing better to do than conduct undercover surveillance from disgusting safe houses and unfortunate hidden bunkers, much like the one in Starcourt.

Before, it had been hugely helpful to have the Mayor of Hawkins on their payroll, meaning that they could operate with free reign. Now, things were different. All they knew was that they were watching out for a girl that had seemingly vanished, a girl who was all but a ghost—no records, no paperwork, nothing.

"Hawkins is a small town," their bored commander had said. "Watch the roads in or out. Any teenage girls coming in, do a follow-up."

It kept them busy. It kept them miserable. The unit that was still in Hawkins wanted desperately to find the girl. Not out of patriotism and not because they had any great scientific curiosity. They didn't even know who the girl was. No, the only reason they were so motivated to find this mysterious girl with the name "Eleven" was because they wanted to go home.

The system they had was simple. A spotter on every road into Hawkins, and a small team of men driving or loitering throughout. The spotters would check the passengers of the vehicles and relay any relevant cars to the men who were circulating the town. It was an imperfect system, and it was not guaranteed to work, since sometimes the spotters fell asleep or just didn't look very hard, but the arrival of the Byers vehicle had been noted immediately. The spotter who had seen it recognized the face of every person in the car—they were all persons of interest in the Starcourt case.

The team didn't know where this info had come from. Hadn't all the Russian survivors gone missing? But they didn't question the intel. This was the first break they had received in the torturous months of watching. And they weren't about to waste their opportunity. It was time to go home.

...

Joyce, Will, and El got out of Mrs. Byers' car in front of an incredibly seedy looking hotel. El hadn't even thought that it *was* a hotel at first. It looked more like an abandoned apartment building. And it was a pretty good distance out of town.

"Why are we here, mom?" asked Will. "This isn't actually where we're staying, is it?"

Mrs. Byers shook her head. "No, this is where someone else is staying. Someone you both are going to want to talk to."

They walked across the parking lot. Will and El exchanged a look of doubt and confusion. El couldn't imagine wanting to meet whatever person was willingly staying here. It looked like barely a step up from living in the woods. Something she had experience with.

Mrs. Byers knocked on one of the hotel room doors and waited. It was the kind of place where the rooms face the parking lot, adding to the general unpleasant ambiance. The door opened a crack, still restrained by the chain on the other side.

El and Will recognized the face, even though it was half-obsured by the partially shut door. "Bald Eagle?" asked El.

Murray Bauman sighed and let them in. "I cannot believe the fate of the world has come down to literal children so many times. Please, come in."

"Why did you pick here?" Will asked, looking around. The inside of the hotel room was no better than the outside. It may have been worse.

"Because no one would willingly come here, which decreased the chance of surveillance!" he snapped. "Something that apparently no one besides me bothers to think about. Please. Sit."

They sat at the tiny table in the dingy motel room. Joyce sat on the bed, as there were only three seats.

"Why are we here?" asked El. "Why are you here?" The only time this man had ever been part of their lives was when there was either trouble occurring or about to be occurring. It made her nervous.

Mrs. Byers put a hand on El's shoulder. "Because Mr. Bauman figured out something very important that you need to hear. It's a huge secret and no one else knows it yet. Your friends will know soon too, but for right now, the only people who know are the ones who are in this room."

"What is it?" asked El.

"Yeah," said Will, looking suspicious. "What's going on?"

Bauman sighed loudly. "For the record, I didn't want to tell anyone. I didn't want to tell you kids and I didn't want to risk the secret getting out. But this woman—" He indicated Joyce. "—convinced me that you *needed* to know. I wanted to know why, seeing as you aren't a superhuman anymore, and her only answer was that you deserved to know, which I thought was a pretty BS excuse."

"What. Is. It." said El, now annoyed.

"Sweetie," said Joyce. "We think Hopper might still be alive."

El's world came to a standstill. The room seemed to expand around her. Her heart was pounding in her ears and her eyes were filling up with tears. Words came out of her mouth, but she couldn't tell what she was saying.

"El..."

She was shaking, the tears pouring down her face now, stunned into some strange mix between anger and fear and helplessness. Angry at Bauman for not telling her earlier. Angry at the world for taking Hopper away from her. And angry at herself for not being able to do anything about it.

"El, you have to listen..."

"I don't *want to!*" she screamed, standing up so fast the chair toppled to the ground. She found herself trying to throw things in the room with nothing but her mind, wondering why nothing was crashing or shattering and then she remembered that she was no less helpless than Bauman or Joyce or Will. Just a person. "He was my *dad!*"

Bauman's face was impassive. He had known she would react like this.

Joyce looked heartbroken. She wanted to take El's pain away, but there was nothing—

"Where is he?" heaved El. "Is he in the Upside Down?"

Bauman raised a hand. "I'm still looking into it. But if my intel is right, he's in Russia."

"*Russia?*" How were they supposed to get him back from there?

"It's the best I can do. There's no guarantee, either. But it's a start. It's hope."

El felt her rage and frustration threatening to bubble over. She delivered a searing glare at Bauman, one that she wasn't even sure he deserved, then she ran out of the room into the parking lot, tears pouring down her face.

Will got up, his face pale from the shock, but a good deal calmer than he adopted sister. "I'll go talk to her."

Joyce nodded her approval. "Just be kind."

She knew she didn't need to say it. Her son was nothing if not kind. He had developed a bond with El over their shared experiences and she knew that right now, he had a better chance of getting through to her than maybe even Mike Wheeler.

...

Outside, El was sitting on the curb by the rarely traveled road that led to the hotel. She was sobbing, her shoulders heaving. Will came over and sat next to her. He didn't put an arm around her and he didn't say anything. He just waited for her to talk.

"It's not fair," she gasped out finally. "Why can't any of us be allowed to be happy? Why can't it be over?"

"I don't know," Will said. "I don't know if anyone does."

"Well, it needs to change!"

Will didn't respond.

"Good people shouldn't have bad things happen to them! Not like this!"

Will lowered his head. "Yeah. It's not fair, is it?"

"No!"

"I'm really sorry, El. No one has been through more than you. And sure, you have Mike and you have my family, but that doesn't make up for everything that you've lost. I don't know how we're going to get Hopper back. And it didn't sound like they do either. But we will. Whether he's in Russia, or a desert, or the North Pole. Even if he's in the Upside Down. I don't care where he is or what we have to do. If there's a chance of getting you your dad back, we're going to do it." Will's words were calm, spoken quietly. He wasn't punctuating his words by waving his arms, he wasn't even raising his voice. He spoke in a soft, slow cadence that was full of belief and patience.

El sniffled. "I'm afraid to hope."

"Me too. But El, just think. Think of everything we've done and everything we've survived. And we're just kids. If I could make it out of the upside down, Hopper is smart enough to survive Starcourt too."

"Your mom told me that she saw him die..."

Will didn't have any response to that. He didn't want to call his mother a liar, but he didn't want to get El's hopes too high either. He had to admit, the chance of Hopper still being alive was almost nonexistent.

"I have an idea," he said finally. "Let's go along with the adults. Sometimes they're useful, right? But who were the ones who really saved the day? Who were the people who had to face the worst of it all?"

"Us kids," El said with the beginnings of a smile.

"Us kids," said Will. "Maybe Hopper is still alive, maybe not. We'll do our own investigation. We'll find out what we need to know. Together. Because you're family now, and I'm not about to let my sister do something like that on her own."

El smiled through her tears. "Thank you, Will."

Will sighed. "You don't need to thank me. If it wasn't for you, we'd all have died so many times. I'll always have your back."

"Even though I like Blade Runner?" asked El, her tone going from sad to mischievous.

"Hey, I like that movie," said Will. "Lucas and Mike don't know what they're talking about."

...

In Russia, the American bided his time. Things were beginning to happen, he knew that. He heard whispers, and they told him exactly what he needed to do. Right now, he needed to wait. The Russians were not any closer to making any relevant discoveries, he could tell that much. That meant that he held all the power, and they didn't even know it. They thought he could help them—little did they know just how right they were.

At night, the American dreamed. His dreams were hazy and indistinct, but he could make out enough. He could see that things were moving quickly. That soon, he would be required to act. What that meant, he wasn't sure yet, but when the time came, he would.

There was a part of him that knew he should be afraid, but for some reason, he didn't feel any fear at all. He wondered why that was. Was it because he was far stronger than all these pathetic Russian soldiers? Was it because he knew so much more than they did? He couldn't say. Nevertheless, he rested easy and waited for his time to come, as it must.

Everything would work out. There was no question about it. It was only a matter of time.

...

"Steve, please," said El. "We really need you to do us this favor."

Steve looked at the kids with suspicion. "You want me to drive you to Hopper's cabin, but it has to be a secret? And you can't tell me why? I don't know about this one, guys. Why can't you just have your parents take you? That place got destroyed, right? Can't be too safe."

"Please?" El said again, her eyes wide and pleading. She knew Steve couldn't resist helping out someone in trouble.

"Fine," he said. "But if anything happens, this is all on you, you hear me? I had nothing to do with it!"

Mike was confused and concerned. He hoped that this crazy plan of El's had nothing to do with their conversation about hurting. He wasn't an expert on grief, but this didn't seem like the best way to go about dealing with things. What was even stranger was that Will had gone right along with it, had backed El up, every step of the way. It had only been yesterday that Joyce had picked them up from the Wheeler house. What was going on? What had they talked about when they had been together? And why wouldn't she tell him?

The rest of the party was there with them too. None of them seemed to have as big a problem with the whole set up as Mike did. It wasn't that he didn't trust El, because he did. It was because he was just concerned as to where this whole thing was going.

They piled into Steve's car (it was a tight fit) and pulled out of the Harrington driveway. "I'd feel a lot better if you guys would just tell me," he said. "I can't help you out if I don't know what's going on."

"What makes you think we need help?" asked Dustin.

Steve scoffed. "Are you kidding? You guys always need help. You're a mess."

Dustin shrugged. "That's fair."

The ride to Hopper's cabin passed without incident. As they pulled up, El felt a wave of nostalgia and emotion wash over her. She had spent so much time here, being kept safe at the risk of Hopper's life. At the time, she hadn't appreciated what he was risking for her. Now,

looking back, she couldn't believe someone could be that selfless. He had been a hero, whether the world recognized it or not.

He is a hero, she corrected herself in her head. He might still be alive somehow.

Steve parked and turned the car off. "Everybody out!" he shouted. "I'll... wait here, I guess? Or am I allowed to come in with you?"

"Could you please wait?" asked El, her voice sweet again. "In case someone dangerous comes. You could keep us safe."

Steve raised an eyebrow. "You must think I'm stupid if you think I'm going to fall for that obvious attempt at flattery. ...but then again, these woods are pretty dangerous, so maybe I will wait here. My prowess might come in handy."

Lucas and Dustin looked at each other, rolling their eyes.

"Yeah, whatever, Harrington," said Max. "C'mon, let's go."

They got out and approached the cabin. El instinctively went to avoid the tripwires that Hopper had put up, but then remembered that they weren't there anymore. She felt a twinge in her chest, the telltale feeling of oncoming sadness, and she grabbed Mike's hand.

"Are you sure you want to do this?" Mike asked. "We really don't have to."

But I do, thought El. And soon he would understand why they needed to.

There had been no real repairs done to the cabin, and most of it had been left the way it had been. Stepping inside sent El's mind spiraling back to all those days spent hiding inside, and her breath caught in her throat.

"You okay?" asked Max.

El nodded, swallowing hard. Will gave her an encouraging look and she crossed the threshold, into the cabin itself.

Once the party was inside, those of them that had no idea what was going on looked around expectantly. "Well?" said Lucas. "What is it?"

Will looked at El. She shook her head. "You tell," she said.

Will took a deep breath and began to relay to the rest of the party the same information that Joyce and Bauman had told them yesterday.

...

"And so that's why we're here," Will concluded. "To see if there was any sign of something Hopper might have left behind. Or maybe evidence that someone came through here, looking at his stuff. Someone who shouldn't have been here. Oh, and you have to keep it a secret. Because we weren't even supposed to tell you. And that bald guy is terrifying, if I'm being honest."

The party was stunned. No one knew what to say. Mike put his arm around El, pulling her close. The idea that Hopper might still be alive and in Russian captivity was just too huge to fully comprehend. Luckily, Max was there to take charge.

"Well, you heard him," she said. "It might be a long shot, but it's all we've got. Get looking. Split up. This place isn't that big, but we want to be as thorough as possible. Think you mouth-breathers can handle that?"

Lucas put his hands up in defense. "Take it easy, Max! We're doing the best we can here! That's a lot of info to just have suddenly dropped on your head like that." He looked to Will and El. "No offense."

El nodded. He wasn't wrong.

They began to look. Mike stayed with El, though neither of them said anything to each other. Mike wasn't sure how he felt about this. Part of it seemed too good to be true. The other part seemed like it was just what El needed—if Hopper really was alive, this would answer all their prayers. But if it was false hope... how could she ever come back from that? Mike just wanted her to be happy, whatever that meant for her.

There wasn't much left in the apartment. They went through every file, every floorboard. Every hole that the Mind Flayer's creation had thrashed in the structure, looking for something, anything, that might have indicated something out of the ordinary.

The longer they looked, the more Mike began to conclude that there was nothing to find. It was nothing more than the ruins of Hopper's cabin.

Two hours went by, the party swapping positions throughout the cabin more than once. It was only then that Mike put his hand on El's shoulder and said, "El...maybe there isn't anything—"

"No!" she shouted, before realizing that she was shouting. "No," she said again, quieter this time. "There has to be something. There's always a clue. There's always a way out."

Max bit her lip.

Mike's eyes were pleading with El. "Remember what we talked about? Sometimes the only way out is to face what's right in front of you. If he is alive, we're not going to find anything here."

Everyone in the room was holding their breath. No one wanted to speak. El looked like she was torn between bursting into tears and screaming at the top of her lungs. She did neither. Instead, she glared at Mike for one moment longer, then stormed past him, out the ruined front door. Mike stood in her wake, watching her go, frozen in his spot. Then his brain seemed to reengage, and he charged out the door after her.

The rest of the party heard Steve, yelling after the two. "Hey! What the hell, guys? Where are you going? Seriously, what the *hell*?"

...

El crashed through the trees. She knew Mike was right, knew that there had been little to no chance of finding anything in the cabin to begin with, but that didn't change how she felt. Just because he was right didn't mean she was wrong. She wanted to keep looking! She couldn't just give up on the man who had saved her life in so many

ways.

"El!" Mike called after her. "C'mon, wait up!"

She ran for only a moment longer before realizing she had no idea where she was going. She could barely see past the veil of tears that had shrouded her eyes and her chest was burning with anger and frustration.

Mike caught up to her in a second. "Hey," he said. "I'm sorry. I know."

He didn't know. He might have thought he did. He might even have a little bit of an idea. But he didn't *know*. How could he? He had lived a relatively normal life with a normal family. He had never needed to rely on the kindness and generosity of a stranger, a stranger who would later give up everything.

"It's not fair!" said El. "He deserves better!"

"And we're going to give it to him," said Mike. "We just can't do that here. You see that, right? We should get back to town and start thinking about what comes next."

"If I had my powers, this would be so easy," sniffed El. "It's my fault we can't save him."

Mike shook his head firmly. "It has nothing to do with you. You saved us all. It was *over*. The Russians were the ones who opened the gate again. It's their fault. You know that, right?"

She did. Deep inside, she did, but it didn't make it any easier. It was just so—

There was a noise. It was coming from behind Mike. Quietly, softly, but it was there.

"Did you hear that?" asked El, looking over Mike's shoulder.

Mike turned around. "Hear what? What happened?"

The noise had stopped, but El knew that it had been there only a moment ago. "Sounded like... someone walking."

Mike peered into the trees. "Maybe it was Steve coming after us?" He cupped his hands to his mouth. "Steve? You there?"

There was no response. Mike turned back to El. "Come back with me, okay? We're going to figure this out."

El nodded slowly and took Mike's hand. She loved his optimism; she loved how much he cared about her. Still though, this time she was worried that they weren't going to figure it out. That there was nothing that could do.

But we have to try.

As Mike turned to lead her back to the cabin, the trees around them exploded into activity.

Men rushed out at the couple, shouting words at them that El didn't understand. The men were dressed in camouflage and carried guns that looked like they would tear the kids to shreds in an instant. El didn't understand why she couldn't make out what the men were saying until she realized that they weren't speaking English. They were speaking Russian.

"Put your hands behind head," said one of the men, a tall blonde brute wearing black, opaque circular sunglasses. "No moves."

El put her arm in front of Mike, preparing to scatter the men with one blast. Then she remembered that she couldn't do that anymore.

"You are the girl, yes?" said another man, gesturing with his gun.

El looked around them. There were at least ten armed soldiers that she could see. That must have been the noise that she had heard.

"Stay away from her!" Mike shouted. "Don't even—"

"Shut up, boy," said the sunglasses-wearing man. His voice was heavily accented. The men surrounding them moved in a little closer, their guns all trained on El. "We have no wish to hurt you."

"You can't do this!" shouted Mike. "The police will—"

The man sighed. "Do nothing. They will never believe. Russian army? In Hawkins. No."

El's heart was pounding. Her arm was still across Mike's chest, though for all the good she could, she might as well have not bothered.

The man in the sunglasses raised a hand. "You come with us now." And then he barked something in Russian. The surrounding armed men all closed in on El. Their intent was clear—to take her with them.

Mike pushed El's arm aside. "Stay back!"

"Shut it, kid."

Mike snapped. He charged at the man in the sunglasses, all his frustration and helplessness coming out of him at once. Mike drew back his fist to throw a punch at the much taller man's face.

The soldier swung his gun, striking Mike in the side of the head, sending him crashing to the ground. El gasped and stepped forward, but the soldiers who were closing in all lifted their guns and aimed them at her in unison.

"If you hurt him..." Her voice trailed off. She had nothing to threaten them with.

The man in the sunglasses aimed his gun down at Mike. "I told him to stay back. Should have listened."

The world slowed to a crawl. A thousand memories came rushing back to El... Mike saving her life, letting her live in his basement. Mike, moving heaven and earth to get her everything she needed to do what needed to be done. Mike, kissing her for the first time. Mike and her at the Snow Ball, happy and carefree, for once.

This doesn't end like this.

Inside her, something changed. It felt like water, raging behind a damn, pushing against a barrier so massive, that nothing on earth could move it. And then, in an instant, with no warning or explanation, the barrier was gone, and the water came torrenting out

in an overwhelming, explosive rush.

"NO!"

Her voice was louder, deeper, amplified by something inside of her. In that moment, she felt her powers come pouring back into her body as the dam shattered. El thrust her arms out, letting the power flow out of her. The soldiers went careening across the forest, some slamming into trees, some skidding along the ground. One accidentally fired his gun, bullets discharging into the air at an earsplitting volume.

The man in sunglasses scrambled on the ground, first sliding his glasses back onto his face and then picking up his gun. There was fear on his face—he knew what El had done to the men working in Hawkins lab. He knew what the girl was capable of. She wasn't supposed to have her powers! This wasn't part of the plan!

El looked at the man with disgust. There were no identifying markers on his uniform, nothing to indicate who he was or where he was from. She knew that she should kill him; she knew that to keep him alive would be a mistake. Yet she couldn't bring herself to do it. Something had changed after becoming a member of the party.

"Go," she said, her hands trembling. "Go. And if you come back... I will not let you go again."

The soldiers were unsteadily rising to their feet. Some of them were picking their guns back up. All of them were looking at their leader, who had backed up into a tree. His mouth was set, his shoulder hunched. He didn't say anything, just rose to his feet and motioned for his men to follow him. One by one, they began to vanish into the forest.

As the last one disappeared, the sound of crunching sticks and leaves drew close. El looked around in alarm, only to see Steve sprinting up to them.

"Guys, I heard a gun! We've gotta get out of here!"

El wiped a trickle of blood away from her nose and smiled.

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Steve took them all back to Mike's house, accepting no arguments or excusing. He had no desire to get them killed by gunfire and then have to answer to Nancy. He was done dealing with that forever.

"You didn't kill them?" asked Max. "But... why? They're going to just try again now."

El shook her head. "Not if they're smart."

"But they know you're here now!" said Dustin. "Of course they'll try again!"

Mike jumped in. "Guys, she didn't want to kill anyone. It's that simple. Let her go. And so what if they know she's here? We know they're here now. And more importantly, El—"

"I have my powers back," El said with a smile.

Her powers returning had come as a huge relief. She had worried they would never come back, despite Mike's arguments that she had just drained her batteries. It wasn't that she thought her powers defined her. It was just that in the world they lived in, she knew they would need every ounce of strength they could find. And now, with Russian soldiers breathing down their necks, they would need to be especially well prepared.

Lucas was pacing back and forth. "They didn't see anyone else, right? Did they say why they were there? I mean, besides for El, obviously. And you! Where the hell were you?" He glared at Steve.

Steve threw up his hands. "Seriously, Sinclair? Where were *you*? I'm the one who came running in! And will someone *please* tell me what's going on now?"

El looked at Mike. "Can I have a blindfold? And a radio?"

Mike looked around the basement for a minute to find the requested items, already knowing what they were going to be used for. In the corner of the room, Will hung up the phone. "Mom is okay," he said to El. "I guess they really were just after you. It's like they don't know

what happened in Starcourt at all."

"Why would they?" asked Lucas. "All those guys died. Or the military took them, but then I think they probably died anyway."

"What's she doing?" asked Steve, watching El tie the bandana around her eyes and tune the radio to a static channel.

"I'm looking for my dad," said El, as she sat very still and closed her eyes. The static reached out and swallowed her whole and she felt herself sinking deep into the blackness, diving after the only man she would ever consider her father.

...

In his cell, the American stood up. The girl was opening up her mind once again. It was time to begin.

4. Chapter 4: The Vision

A/N: This chapter tried to balance horror along with way more character moments than previous chapters. Thanks for reading!

In her head, things looked different. It was still dark, nothing but darkness all around her. That wasn't the change. It felt different. It felt like something had shifted, like the winds of change were blowing through. El wondered where she had heard that phrase before, because it didn't sound like something Hopper would say. Maybe she had gotten it from Joyce.

She stepped forward into the darkness, peering for her father. She didn't need a picture; she didn't need any kind of physical representation for him in the real world like she did when she was looking for others. Her connection to the man she called dad was too strong for something like that.

"Hello?" she called out, and her voice echoed in the emptiness. "Are you there?"

She didn't know what came over her. Maybe it was the heaviness of the silence, maybe it was all the emotions she had been trying to deal with, maybe it was the shock of learning that her guardian might still be alive—whatever it was, she started to talk. She started to say things that she had never said to Hopper before, things that were true and that she should have said long ago.

"I miss you. I've missed you since before you disappeared. I missed you when I was too busy being selfish. And ignoring that all you really wanted for me was the best. I'm sorry. I know you would tell me to shut up and try to apologize instead, but that's wrong. I'm sorry. I would have been a better daughter. I would have listened. We're just all... mouth-breathers when we're young. I think."

She frowned. It was probably the longest speech she had ever given to Hopper, and he wasn't there to hear it.

Then she heard a voice. It was quiet, like it was coming from far away. It was confused and it sounded lost, almost like a child.

"El?"

"Dad!"

It was him; she could hear him. He was still alive! Her dad was still alive! Her heart pounded so hard that she thought it might burst from her ribs.

"Dad, I'm here! I'm here now! My batteries recharged. I can save you! I can save everyone!"

"El..."

And then the voice trailed into silence, even weaker and quiet than it had been the first time. She could see him, just barely, in the distance. Her view of him was fuzzy and distorted, like a bad television picture. She could see his surroundings, too. It didn't look like a Russian jail cell. It looked like he was outside, surrounded by rotting, twisted trees.

"Dad! Where are you? I'm here!"

The vision of Hopper faded as quickly as it had appeared.

There was no reply. El's heart began to break. She was so close! Where had he gone? Why couldn't she hear him anymore?

"Eleven."

The voice that spoke then was not Hopper's. It was neither male nor female, and it rang loudly in El's head. It was a voice she had heard before, but never while she was awake. It was the voice of her dreams. The voice of her nightmares. It was the voice that had been taunting her at night and causing her to sleep so restlessly. It was real.

"Who are you?" she whispered, and there was fear in her voice.

"I am everything. I am the sky under which you breathe and the ground on which you walk. I am the keeper of this prison. I am the watcher with one million eyes. And you do not belong here."

El looked up, to where the sky would be, if she were still standing in the real world, and she saw nothing but darkness. "I need to find him!"

"He is lost. And you are nothing. Leave now and hold your loved ones close. Soon all will become one."

El clenched her fists and stood as tall as she could. She was not the sky, nor the ground, and she only had two eyes. But she would tear apart anyone who got in the way of her family. "No."

The voice began to make a strange noise, one that bounced around the inside of her head and made her jaw and temple ache. It took her a moment to realize that the voice was laughing at her. "Then open your eyes and see."

The blackness that she had come to know so well dissolved into something else, and El's head was filled with a terrible spinning sensation that drove her to her knees. She shut her eyes as tight as she could and covered her ears with her hands, attempting to restore some sort of balance and equilibrium.

The feeling was gone after a moment, and El opened her eyes to see she was no longer in the darkness. She was standing in Mike's basement. Her blindfold was off, and the radio was silent. But those weren't the only changes. Her friends were gone as well. She was standing by herself in the Wheeler's basement.

The air was thick and smelled of burning. She was instantly reminded of the vision she had received of Billy, back when he was flayed and had known he was being spied upon. This was not reality, nor was it the world of darkness. This was somewhere in between.

"Hello?"

She moved slowly, as if in a dream. Her limbs felt heavy and her pulse sounded slow and far too loud. She climbed the stairs, tasting the air and blanching. It reminded her of the smell of death. The smell of the lab. The smell of the closet she had been locked in, time after time, by the man who claimed to be her papa.

"Mike?"

She pushed open the door to the upstairs and peeked out. There was no one in sight. A heavy layer of dust had settled over everything in the house, as if years had gone by without anyone touching anything. She swallowed hard.

As she emerged from the basement, she saw that the dust had not only settled on the interior of the house, it was floating in the air too. A closer look caused her stomach to drop. It wasn't dust at all. It was ash. Thick, heavy ash floating in the sky. It looked like the sickening air of the Upside Down, and it caused her to shudder.

She tiptoed through the house, making her way towards the front door. She felt like she was on the verge of throwing up without knowing why.

The front door was swinging open slightly. The door handle was snapped off and the lock mechanism was destroyed. El looked at it with apprehension, then gingerly pulled it open. She realized that she was doing everything as silently as possible to avoid breaking the oppressive lack of sound.

Outside, there was no sound either. No cars, no birds. No wind. El still felt like she was walking through molasses, unable to move at any sort of speed. "Hello?" she called out again. "Mike? Dad? Joyce? Someone?"

Her voice didn't echo. It died as soon as it came out of her mouth.

She looked down the sidewalk, hoping to see some sign of life through the ash that was drifting through the air. Her breath caught in her throat as she made out the form of a figure in the distance. Whoever it was happened to be walking her way. El straightened up and began to close the gap, taking in her surroundings as she went.

It was like the world has stopped working. There were cars, but they all looked like they hadn't been started in years. Many had holes in the windows and the tires were flat. Many more were rusted all the way through. Almost every single one looked unusable in any degree. The ash was everywhere, falling gently from the sky, the sky that was

a painfully bright grey, even though no sun was visible. The homes all looked empty; there was no life to be seen in any of the windows.

"Hello?" she said. She wanted to say more, but the words kept getting stuck in her throat.

The figure was more visible now. It was someone that she recognized, the way they walked, the shape of their body. She couldn't place the name at first, because something was wrong. Something was wrong about the way they moved, about the way they stared straight ahead as they limped forward—

Hopper. It was her dad.

His right leg was dragging, and he was staring at El with no recognition on his face. There was blood all over his clothing, and his eyes were red from exhaustion. "D-dad?" she stuttered.

Hopper stopped walking only a few feet in front of her. She tried to feel relief. She had found him. He was here! But the look on his face—the lack of expression, the deadness in his eyes—chilled her to the core. She felt more unsafe than ever.

Hopper looked at her, saying nothing. Then, slowly, he opened his mouth. "W-where were you?"

"I don't understand," she said, as the ash continued to fall, some of it sticking to her hair. "What do you mean?"

"When it came. And took us all away. Where were you?" Hopper coughed and wiped flecks of blood from his mouth.

"You're not my dad," El said, suddenly feeling very small. "You're not real."

Hopper looked down at her, and now there was life in his eyes. Life—and anger. "They all died. Or worse, they were taken. Because you were never good enough, were you? Everyone that touches you dies. I should have never taken you in. Should've just let you die in the cold." He spat at her feet.

El drew backwards, shivering. "You don't mean it. You don't mean it.

It's not real."

She looked up at the sky and screamed so loud she thought she could taste blood.

...

"El! It's okay! What is it? I'm right here!" Mike grabbed El, pulling her into a tight hug. She had screamed louder than he had ever heard a human being scream and the lights had flickered for a good five seconds before everything returned to normal.

El ripped off the blindfold, her eyes wild and red, tears pouring down her face. "He's alive," she said. "But not in Russia."

Then she got up and ran to the nearest trashcan and proceeded to become violently ill.

Everyone looked at her with deep concern. Mike crossed the room to her, helping her hold her back while she threw up. He had never seen her react like this to using her powers before, not even when things had gotten bad.

"What was it?" he said softly, after she had lifted her head up and was sitting curled against him. "What did you see?"

"I know where he is," said El, who realized she was shaking and couldn't make it stop. "He's in the upside down. He needs out help." She had recognized it instantly. The rotting trees, the sickly air, the twisted version of the real world. There was no doubt at all where Hopper was.

Everyone in the room felt their jaws drop. "How is that possible?" asked Lucas. "You remember what Mrs. Byers said. There was nobody left alive even near that thing."

Dustin's face was one of dawning realization. "No... I wasn't there but I think I know what happened. You're right, no one was alive near it. But what if the Chief wasn't near it when it exploded?"

"Where would he have gone?" asked Will. "He couldn't possibly have made it out in time."

And then Max understood as well. "Yeah, he could have. But not up to Mrs. Byers. The only way out would have been the other way."

They all spoke at once, having figured it out. "...The Upside Down."

It made sense. Hopper must have known that he was never going to make it out of that room alive. He could have easily jumped into the Upside Down via the portal before it shut. It wasn't a great chance of survival, but it was certainly better than getting vaporized by the explosion that had rocked the lab only seconds later. They knew he was alive now, which was great. But how were they going to get him out of a dimension that was now permanently sealed off from their world?

"That means my mom was wrong," said Will. "We have to tell her."

"Uh, she's gonna know you told us then, you know that, right?" asked Lucas.

Will shrugged. "I don't really see another option here. And besides, she'll understand. There's no way she thought we were really going to keep that to ourselves. Bauman on the other hand..."

"Bald eagle?" piped in Dustin.

"... Bauman," continued Will, "might be a different story. But we know the truth now."

El was starting to calm down, if only a little. She just couldn't get that image out of her head, the thing that she had seen in the sky that had jolted her so badly it had thrown her back into the real world. And what had that been? A vision? A dream?

"There's something else," said El. "I saw something else."

Mike pulled her close to him. "What was it?"

"Everything was dead. It was like this world, but empty. Ash, everywhere. And then I saw Hopper, but he was wrong. He was sick. He told me it was my fault. I looked up to the sky... and I saw it."

"What was it?" Mike asked, his voice hushed. No one in the room was

speaking, everyone was practically holding their breath.

"I felt like I wanted to die," whispered El. "I felt like I would never be happy again."

Steve turned to look at Dustin, who first looked confused, and then an expression of slow realization spread over his face. "You know, I'd really like to say I told you so, but it just doesn't seem appropriate right now."

...

"What do you mean he's not in Russia?" asked Joyce. "How is that possible?"

Will shook his head. "I don't know who Bauman heard them talking about, but it wasn't Hopper. He's in the Upside Down, and we need to find a way back in."

Joyce bit her lip. It was at times like this that she missed Hopper more than ever. It wasn't that she couldn't handle things by herself. She was more than strong enough, as she had shown time after time. It was that Hopper knew how to take charge of situations with a certainty she never felt, other than when it came to keeping her family safe.

Hopper is family too, she thought, involuntarily. *You need to protect him, too.*

"El's visions have been wrong before though, right?" Joyce asked. "Like with Billy. I'm not saying you're wrong, I'm just saying we need to be careful."

"We need to reopen the gate," said El. That was the problem. Without the machine in Hawkins lab, she had no idea how they would do that. The amount of energy it would require was staggering.

"We'll figure something out, honey. We always do," said Joyce. "And I'm going to keep everyone safe. I promise."

...

In Russia, the gulag was on fire. The time had come for action to be taken, and the American had stepped out of his cell. No, that was the wrong word. He had not just stepped out of his cell. He had arisen, knocked the door off its hinges, and begun to make his way towards the exit. There would be no survivors. They had all served their purpose, and now it was time to die.

The work they were doing in the base had been negligible at best, but it had been enough to begin opening cracks between the two worlds. Just enough so that when Eleven, when that troublesome girl began poking her nose where it didn't belong, he could sense it. It was time to put an end to this back and forth once and for all. Yes, the girl had defeated some very powerful enemies. But she had never seen anything like him. Never even come close. And the delicious scream she had let out when he had revealed only the barest fraction of his true self to her... it was all the evidence he needed of her weakness.

The gates were beginning to open across the globe. He could feel them on the periphery of his consciousness. It was funny. There used to be another self inside this body, he knew that. But that self was gone, long gone, and it would never return. It had begun to die just two years ago, when one of those creatures had sunk its teeth into the body. The corruption had taken root then. Over the next two years, as the American was kept in captivity and more gates opened, the body became the perfect host.

The perfect host to forever link two worlds and shatter any barriers that remained.

A soldier screamed as the blood vessels in his brain burst and blood began to stream out of his eyes and ears. The American smiled. These people were so weak. So fragile. They would be the first to change in the new world that was coming. A new world full of madness and beauty, one that would redefine the rules of existence.

But before that could happen, he needed that girl. After he was done in Russia, Hawkins would be next. He would need some time to recoup his strength to be able to deal with the girl. It meant nothing. They could do nothing to stop him. She was on the other side of the planet, vomiting into a trash can because she couldn't even look at him.

The war was already as good as won. It would just take a little bit longer.

...

Mike couldn't believe he was seriously going to have to go to school when it felt like the end of the world was just around the corner. His mother refused to budge. No matter how hard he tried to explain that El needed him, that his friends needed him, that if they didn't have to go to school, he didn't see why he had, she just would not listen.

"You can see your friends when you get home," she had said to him. And that was the end of the discussion.

So Mike was sitting in his first period Literature class, wondering what he had done to deserve this kind of hell. It wasn't that he didn't like school. He *was* still a nerd after all. It was just... I mean, El was probably sitting around all by herself. She was so close and yet so far and it was driving Mike mad.

High school had started off as a bit of struggle. Not academically, he was usually pretty good at things in school. He just hated how bigger everything was, he hated being even lower on the totem pole than he had been in middle school, and he hated how new it all was. Not being able to see his friends all the time hurt too.

More and more Mike was starting to wonder what it would be like to not have to be in school. Or at least this kind of school. He had heard stories from Nancy about what college was like—she had decided to go to the local community college for two years before moving somewhere else. She knew plenty of new people already and the level of freedom sounded great. Mike wondered idly what he was going to do in the future. His best subject in school for the past few years had been science. He thought about why that might be and decided that in all honesty, it probably came back down on Mr. Clark. He considered the idea of standing in front of a classroom, just like Mr. Clark, and immediately realized the problem with that—he'd have to deal with kids just like himself.

There's not enough money in the world for that!

Still though. Maybe one day, when he was older and had his life a little more worked out.

"Mr. Wheeler? Maybe you can enlighten the rest of us on the point of this passage. After all, Romeo just met Juliet. So how could he possibly be in love with her?"

His Literature teacher was looking at him with a pointed expression, and Mike knew he was busted. Slacking off was so much harder in high school! It didn't help that studying Romeo and Juliet irritated him. Not because he didn't like the story—there was nothing wrong with it. Rather, he didn't like the dismissive way everyone talked about their love. Just because none of them had ever really loved someone didn't give them the right to laugh about it.

Mike couldn't help but draw comparisons between himself and El to Romeo and Juliet.

"Yeah," said Mike. "I can. They both have some sort of trauma going on. Romeo just had his heart broken, even if it was kinda in a stupid way. But he's young and doesn't know better. Plus he falls in love easily. And then Juliet got told that she has to marry someone that she has no interest in. I mean, I know that's what happened back then but that doesn't make it any easier for the people who have it happen to them. So they see each other, and they don't know each other at all, but they're both beautiful. And things just progress from there."

The teacher blinked twice and nodded slowly. "Yeah. I mean, most students definitely don't see it like that, but that could be a very good explanation for why they do the things they do. And remember, just because things seem strange to us, here in 1985, doesn't mean they were strange back then. Good job, Mike. I'm impressed."

The rest of the class was looking at Mike like he had three heads, but he didn't care. Getting that one off his chest felt good. He wished that Romeo and Juliet had worked out.

We'd have been smarter than that, he thought. That's the big difference. We never give up on each other.

...

School passed with agonizing slowness, like it always did, but *finally* Mike was able to leave. He knew he was going to need to get a ride to the hotel where the Byers family was staying so he could see El and he hoped that Nancy would be able to take him.

When he got home and asked her, she sighed. "Mike, I have a *lot* of work to do."

"C'mon," he whined. "Don't you want to see Jonathan?"

"I mean, yes," she said. "Of course I do. But I have homework! That doesn't stop after high school, you know. In fact, it might get worse..."

Mike gulped at the thought of that, then pushed it away. "It can wait. Love waits for no one!"

Nancy rolled her eyes. "Alright, Romeo. Let's get going. But you have to get your own ride back!"

"Deal," said Mike with a grin. Nancy had the capability to be annoying, but more often than not, she came through with him. The card ride would give him the chance to fill her in on everything as well.

Once they were in the car, Mike turned to Nancy. "So I have some things you really need to know about."

He spent the entire drive describing everything that had occurred over the last few days. Nancy listened grimly, her mouth set in a tight line. When he was finished, he noticed that her hands were gripped tightly on the steering wheel, and that her knuckles were white.

"Thank you for telling me," she said. "I just—does none of this ever end? When do we get to go back to regular again?"

Mike shook his head sadly. "I don't know if we do."

"Yeah," said Nancy. "You might be right." She looked at him fondly and smiled. "When did you get to be so smart?"

"I mean, I grew up at some point," Mike huffed.

"Sorry to say, but you'll always be my annoying little brother. That's just the way it is."

Mike rolled his eyes. "I'm sure I will."

Nancy kept going. "Even if you're not so little anymore! How are you and El doing? Still going strong?"

Mike had no real desire to discuss his love life with his sister, who had one of the most convoluted odd love lives of anyone he knew. "It's fine," he said shortly, feeling himself blushing.

"She is *so* pretty," said Nancy. "And smart. And brave. How did you get so lucky?"

Finally, something they could agree. "I ask myself that every day," said Mike.

Nancy laughed. "I'm just kidding! She's lucky too. Just because you're my annoying brother doesn't mean I can't see who you're becoming. The two of you belong together. Anyone can see that."

Mike looked at his sister with gratitude. "Thanks, Nancy." He paused. "You and Jonathan too. I think he's good for you. You guys balance each other out. Even if he is corrupting El's taste in movies."

...

When Mike got to the hotel, Mrs. Byers wasn't there. El opened the door with a huge smile. "Mike!" she threw her arms around him and gave him a tight hug. "I missed you!"

"You have no idea," said Mike. "Where's Mrs. Byers? I thought you were sharing a room."

"We are," said El. "She went into town. I think to see friends, but I think to see... my dad's grave, too."

"Why would she do that? He's not..." Mike's voice trailed off. Even if Hopper *was* alive, as he seemed to be, it was still an awkward subject to talk about.

El shrugged, her smile faltering for only a moment. "Come in!"

He came inside and she left the door open. It was only a crack—but he had noticed that she had started doing that ever since Hopper had disappeared. Out of respect or to honor his memory, he wasn't sure. It didn't matter. He was happy to go along with it.

She was listening to strange music, very loudly. There was a soft guitar and a very British voice singing over it, in a mournful manner. Mike made out some lyrics about an astronaut. "What are you listening to?" he asked.

El beamed. She was so happy when Mike took an interest in what she was doing. Since she had begun to build a life of her own, it had been exhausting to form... interests. There was just *so much* out there and she didn't understand how anyone had time to look at or listen to it all. Jonathan had been a big part in helping show her the world of art. Music and movies and paintings and television... it fascinated her. Even if her life could sometimes be even more interesting.

"David Bowie," she said. "Space Oddity. 1972 re-release. Isn't it nice?"

"It's sad," said Mike.

El hummed along to the melody. Mike heard the song mention someone named Major Tom.

"Major Tom is missing," said El. "They don't know what happened and he can't come back on his own. It is sad. But he doesn't seem sad. It seems like he decided it was for the best."

They waited until the song was over. El pushed stop on the cassette player and looked at Mike. "We're going to get him back," he said. "I promise."

"Major Tom?" asked El, a twinkle in her eye.

Mike pushed her and laughed. "You know what I mean!" Then the lightheartedness of the moment dropped away as he remembered what had occurred only just last night. "Are you okay?"

El looked at the ground. "I don't know. It was awful, Mike."

"It isn't going to happen, whatever it was. We'll stop it."

El nodded, not trusting herself to speak.

"What did Mrs. Byers say?" asked Mike. "How did she take the news?"

"She didn't say much," said El. "But she cried a lot when no one was looking."

Mike could understand why. It was a confusing time. "I wonder if she's going to talk to Bauman?"

"Maybe," said El. She paused and then leaned in close to Mike. "Mike?"

"Hmm?" said Mike, who was considering what the future might hold for him and the party.

"Can we not think about this for a little?" El asked. She leaned in close.

Mike smiled. "Of course," he said. And then he didn't have to say anything for a little while longer.

...

"Bauman, I don't *care* if this line isn't secure, I'm not driving out to you again! Listen to me!"

"No!"

"Hopper *isn't dead and he's not in Russia.*"

There was silence. Joyce derived some satisfaction from the fact that she had managed to stun the normally verbose Bauman into saying nothing at all.

"You heard me," she said. "And I have good proof too."

Bauman sighed into the phone. "It doesn't matter. Because the people I was communicating with aren't there anymore."

Joyce paused. "They aren't there? What does that even mean?"

"I don't know!" said Bauman with frustration. "But they aren't responding. It doesn't even look like they're receiving."

"What could have caused that?" asked Joyce.

"Two options," said Bauman. "Either they turned off their transceiver or the transceiver isn't there anymore. I don't see any reason why they would turn it off, which makes me think something happened. There's nothing we can do about it and there's no way to find out the truth. Now what's this about Hopper?"

Joyce explained El's vision, leaving out the part about the soldiers coming to take her in. The last thing she wanted to do was increase Bauman's paranoia anymore.

"Jesus," said Bauman. "Do you think it's connected? Oh, who am I kidding, it has to be. What the hell is *happening* to this world? Did you know, Joyce Byers, that I used to be a downright optimistic and friendly man?"

"Hmm," said Joyce, very much doubting that either word could have ever been used to describe Murray Bauman.

"I'll keep looking into things," said Bauman. "But don't hold your breath. I think I might have gotten everything out of this that I'm going to get. And for the love of God... do *not* call here again!"

...

Steve was dejectedly walking into his shift at the Family Video when Robin came running out the front door, nearly knocking him over. "Steve!" she cried out as he stumbled backwards.

"Jesus, Robin, what's the rush? I thought you actually liked this place."

He looked a little closer and saw that she had just been crying. Or had suffered a severed allergy attack, but as far as he knew, she didn't have any allergies. "Hey. What's going on?"

Robin looked at him, appeared to be about to sniffle, then restrained herself. Of course. She didn't want him to see her cry. "Nothing,

Steve. I'm just sick. Good luck today, okay?"

She started to walk away, but Steve grabbed her arm. "What happened? What did you see?"

Robin looked at him, her eyes wide and her expression confused. "How did you know I saw something?" she asked.

"Because you're not the first one. Now come inside and tell me about it."

Robin didn't argue and followed Steve back into the Family Video on shaky legs. The story she told him once they were inside was familiar. It sounded almost identical to the one that Dustin had told him only a few days ago. By now, of course, Steve knew that Dustin was telling the truth. It was still shocking to hear it happening again.

"Am I going crazy?" Robin asked when she was finished. "What's wrong with me?"

Steve shook his head. "No, you're not crazy. This is real and it's happening to other people."

"What is it?"

"We don't know. But if I had to put my money on something, it'd be the Upside Down again."

"This didn't happen last time," said Robin, who was beginning to calm down. "It can't be that, right? The gate was closed."

"A few days ago I would have said the same thing," said Steve. "But do I have a story for you..."

...

The gulag fell with ease. The American stood on the outside of the Russian prison and surveyed his surroundings with grim pleasure. The building was on fire and there was little to nothing remaining of what had once stood behind him.

His next move would need to be a drastic one and would likely set

into motion events that would alert the girl to his presence, but it was a necessary risk to take. It was, after all, the only way to get his frail human body to where it needed to be in such a short span of time.

The American laughed to himself. Humans. With just one of them, he could wipe out an entire building full of armed men. But he couldn't even travel to a different country without evoking the energy of the next dimension.

Not that it would matter. The girl had seen what was coming and the gates were already beginning to crack open all across the world. He could feel the energy starting to spill out, infecting the psyche of anyone unfortunate enough to get close.

The American closed his eyes and concentrated. Around him, the fabric of the world began to twist and split, and the smell of the next dimension bled through. He stepped backwards into it, letting it close behind him.

The amount of energy it took to open even a portal of that size was enormous. That was why he needed to get to the girl. She would provide him with everything he needed to permanently open the firmament and return all of reality to its natural order.

As the darkness enveloped him, the American smiled. But there was nothing human left in that smile. Not a thing.

...

When Joyce got back to the hotel room, she saw El sleeping on the bed with Mike next to her. But Mike was wide awake, sitting up, just watching El.

Joyce looked at the clock, hoping it wasn't really *that* late. She didn't need to worry. It wasn't late at all. Mike smiled slightly. "She tried using her powers a bit. Just to see how much had returned."

Joyce was nervous. El's powers were something that she didn't really understand. If something went wrong, she knew that she'd do her best to protect the girl, but how much could a single mother do in the

face of something like that? "And?"

"And they seem to be back," Mike shrugged. "She's just exhausted. I told her I'd stay for awhile longer in case she woke up."

Joyce set her purse down and sat on the adjacent bed. "You're a good boyfriend," she said. "I'm sorry El had to move so far away."

Mike looked glum. "It's okay. I mean, it's tough. I miss her like crazy. But I really do just want what's best for her. And if you think that's best, that's good enough for me."

"Maybe if we get Hopper back, things can change," Joyce said. "I can't tell you what's going to happen in the future, but I want everyone to be happy."

"What about you, Mrs. Byers?" asked Mike. "What would make you happy?"

She smiled warmly at him. "When everyone is safe."

And she added silently in her head, *And when I can see Jim again.*

If El said the man was alive, then he was alive. That was all there was to it. Jim Hopper had saved everyone. Now, Joyce would save him.

"C'mon," she said. "It's a school night. I'll drive you home."

Mike's shoulders sagged. "Ah... but... I was hoping..."

"You were hoping you weren't going to have to go to school, weren't you?" Joyce knew very well how kids thought.

Mike nodded.

"Well," Joyce said, her eyes twinkling. "If your girlfriend was sick, you couldn't just leave her on her own, could you?"

"No," said Mike, distractedly, not understanding. "Of course not."

Joyce picked up the hotel phone. "I'll let Karen know that El just isn't feeling well. And you're doing such a good job of taking care of her."

Mike's face broke out into a goofy smile. "Thanks, Mrs. Byers! That really means a lot!"

"Three inches, Wheeler," she said sternly. And then the two of them laughed. When they were done laughing, they both had to wipe tears away—tears of both joy and sadness.

5. Chapter 5: The Entry

(A/N: Thanks to everyone who has subscribed and favorited. And extra thanks to anyone who took the time to review!)

El dreamed that night. She slept deeply and she knew that her dreams were far from being merely dreams. She saw the Upside Down again; she saw it opening up. She watched as shapes that she could barely discern moved in and out of existence, slipping between the two worlds. It made her feel uneasy, because she knew these things were not natural and did not belong on the planet. They belonged locked away, kept in the Upside Down for all eternity.

El knew that the visions of the portals opening were real, that the Upside Down was once again going to be connected to the world she lived in. She didn't know what was causing it to happen, but she had an idea. It was the same thing she had seen in the other vision, the thing that had terrified her so badly it had caused her pain. It was the voice that had been speaking to her while she slept.

When she awoke, she was sweating, yet cold. She looked around and realized that Mike was gone and she was by herself. She feared for a moment that it was another one of those horrible visions, that she would look out the window to see ash drifting from the sky, but her fears were in vain. The air didn't taste like burning and death and she didn't feel sick. She did feel a little hungry, though.

El got out of bed and opened the minifridge in the hotel room, pulling a box of Eggos out of the small freezer section. While she waited for her snack to be finished in the small toaster oven, she thought about what was sure to happen next—something she was simultaneously desperate for and terrified of.

She was going to need to rescue Hopper.

It would mean a few things. First, finding out exactly where he was located in the Upside Down. The more she stretched her "mental muscles" as Mike had put it a few times, the more her power returned. She knew this wouldn't be too much of an issue. The second part, the part that scared her so badly, was knowing she would need

to go into the Upside Down, more than likely by herself. Of course, Joyce and Mike would offer. They would refuse to let her go on her own, claiming that it was too dangerous and that they would be there to help her. It didn't matter what they said, because she would never allow it. Yes, it was going to be wildly dangerous. At least she had the power to deal with that sort of thing. They were just people. Kind, loving, amazing people. But just people, nonetheless.

El sat on the floor and ate her Eggo. She wondered where Joyce was and concluded that her adopted mother must have driven Mike home. She was briefly disappointed until the door opened and Mike and Joyce walked in, both laughing.

"Mike!" said El, her face lit up with excitement.

Mike grinned. "Mrs. Byers said she'd help me spend some more time with you. No school for me tomorrow!"

El jumped up with joy. "Thank you!" she cried out to her new mom. "Thank you so much!"

Mrs. Byers nodded. "Just be sure to remember this, okay? Don't say I never did anything for you."

Her words were stern but her voice was joking. El was so happy she thought she might burst. Mike could always calm her down, no matter what was on her mind. It would give her an opportunity to enjoy some time with him before she walked into what was most certainly going to be nothing short of hell.

"I thought you went home!" she said to Mike. She looked at the clock, confused. "It's so late. Where did you go?"

"Well, I did go home," said Mike. "But only to get clothes and things. My mom said I could stay here since you weren't feeling well."

"I'm not feeling well?" said El, confused. "I feel okay."

Mike laughed. "Of course you do! It was a lie."

El frowned. "Lying is bad."

Mike looked concerned for a moment, but Joyce stepped in to save him. "You're right, lying is bad. We just wanted to make sure that he could spend as much time with you as possible. That's a good thing, right?"

El decided to not think too hard about it. It was true, she was so happy that Mike would be spending the night with them. Even if that did mean they'd need to sleep in the same room as Joyce.

"Hopper would lose his mind," sighed Joyce. "When we get him back, absolutely not a word of this to him, you understand!"

Mike gulped and nodded. As happy as he was going to be to get Hopper back, he did not want any news of this reaching the chief.

"We went out and got snacks and a movie," said Joyce. "I thought it might be a nice way to spend the night."

"Thank you," said El, hesitating only a brief second before adding, "mom."

Joyce beamed. "It's my pleasure."

As they put the movie in and settled down together to watch, El tried to ignore the knowledge that very soon she would be forced to once again confront some of her worst fears, all alone, with no guarantee of success. The thought made her shiver. She tried to forget about, if only for a little. The warmth of Mike's arm around her shoulders certainly helped.

...

Nancy and Jonathan were finally together, later in the night after Nancy dropped Mike off at the hotel. Jonathan couldn't believe that Nancy had actually gone back home without saying anything to him.

"I had a lot of work!" she said. "College is hard!"

"I believe you," he grumbled. "You still could have at least just dropped in to say hello."

Nancy looked away, blushing. "I wouldn't have been able to make

myself leave."

"Okay, okay, fine," said Jonathan. "Just saying. I'd have stopped by for you." He wasn't angry; he was only pretending. It was just so easy to fluster Nancy sometimes that he couldn't resist.

The two of them had driven to the nearby gorge and were sitting overlooking the water below. There was so much to say to one another, and neither of them knew where to start. The long distance hadn't been easy on either of them but never for even a second had they thought about calling it quits. There was too much between them to give up because of something as simple as the number of miles.

They had talked about the future and what it might bring. Ultimately, they had decided to take it one day at a time. Jonathan had been lucky enough to begin working for the local newspaper where he had moved to as one of their main photographers. Nancy was going to college for journalism. Where would they end up? They didn't know, but they did know that they were going to try everything in their power to make it work.

After everything that they had gone through, they had forged a bond. Murray Bauman, as crass as he was, had been right. Shared trauma had brought them together. Sometimes, Nancy wondered if that was the main reason they were together. After all, they had met under less than pleasant circumstances that had painted Jonathan in something of a negative light. But then she remembered all the wonderful things she knew about her boyfriend, and all those doubts faded away. Jonathan had shown her over and over that he was more than her mistakes and that he was unlike the rest of the world. He was thoughtful and sensitive and intelligent and he had dreams. He even managed to keep her grounded.

"Do you think they're going to find Hopper?" she asked, as they looked down at the water below.

Jonathan shrugged. "I don't know. Part of me knows that I'll never forget what happened there. The other part of me just wants to move on. I don't think we're really supposed to be dealing with all that, you know? And now that Will is back doing so much better, I think I'm

ready to change the world in some other way."

"You still think we can do that? I thought..."

Jonathan shrugged. "I know. I can be a little more cynical than you. I did some thinking though. What if we're both right?"

Nancy smiled. "So wise!"

Jonathan grinned rakishly. "Even I can learn some things now and again."

"I just don't want anything to happen to the kids," said Nancy. "I want to move on too. More and more it just feels like I don't really belong here anymore. But we can't just let them go up against whatever's happening on their own."

"We'll always be there for them," said Jonathan. "That doesn't have to change."

Nancy leaned her head on his shoulder. "Thank you," she said.

He looked at her, surprised. "For what?"

"For being you," she said. That was more than enough.

"It would be pretty hard for me to be anyone else," he said.

She laughed. Jonathan was a lot of things. He wasn't perfect, but then, frankly, neither was she. Little by little, she was learning to live with her imperfections. The balance he brought her was more and more necessary in the increasingly mad world they lived in.

"Everything's going to be alright, isn't it?" Nancy asked.

"It's going to be alright," said Jonathan.

And for a little while, she could believe him.

...

The Upside Down was hell. There was no other way to look at it. He had been there a few times, but never for so long. The air was

poisonous here. Will Byers' experience had proven that.

Hopper didn't know for much longer he was going to be able to make it. Did anyone even know that he was alive?

El knows. I heard her. I could hear her.

He had nearly lost any hope of being discovered when he had heard her voice, quietly and coming from far away, but her voice nonetheless. She must have gone looking for him, doing whatever it was that she did inside her head. He wondered why she had only looked now. He hoped it was because she was trying to grieve in a healthy way.

That's my girl.

Surviving in the Upside Down had been the hardest thing he had ever done. Harder than his time in the military. Than his time as a detective. Certainly harder than his time in Hawkins. He didn't regret his decision. Joyce had survived and the gate had been closed. He thought back to the final, fateful night underneath Starcourt, when the Russians machine had been destroyed.

There had been no way out. He had known that as soon as he had begun to fight the massive Russian thug. He had taken one last look at Joyce, hoping that she would understand that everything was alright, that this was his choice.

And then the machine began to spit lightning. Hopper had seen one option and one option only: the gate. It hadn't closed completely yet and there was no other way out of the room, not before the machine incinerated everything living thing in the vicinity. He had thrown himself through the crack just as the machine exploded, without any time to even think about his decision.

Now, standing in what appeared to be a blow-out supermarket in the Upside Down, he knew that he had made the right decision.

After he had jumped through, the first thing he had done was take stock of what he had on him. His gun, an extremely limited pool of ammunition for it, along with one of the Russian's guns and a few

magazines for that. Aside from that, he hadn't brought much.

Over the next few days, he needed to find a source of food, water, and something to protect his breathing. Fortunately, there had been dead soldiers littering the area, many of who had been wearing respiratory devices. He had taken them, along with scraps of fabric torn off the corpses to use as bandannas. They had a limited amount of supplies on them as well.

And then he had set out to see what he could find.

The short answer was not much.

The longer answer was that the Upside Down was full of horrors. The demogorgons, the demo... dogs, as that toothless kid insisted on calling them. And there were other things, too. Things that hid in the shadows, that he could only just barely get a look at. Things that made his skin crawl and stomach heave. The Mind Flayer itself seemed to be absent. Hopper didn't know if it was regaining its strength or if it was dead. In either case, it made him uneasy. He'd rather an enemy that he could see. At least then he would know if it was about to kill him.

The weeks of solitude had passed slowly. Because of the hostile nature of every inch of the Upside Down, he needed to always be on guard. It was exhausting and it was wearing him down.

At first, he didn't think there was a chance that they would ever find him—they'd assume he was dead. And if they didn't assume that, the gate was closed. It would be impossible to open it. The thing was, the word impossible had ceased to have any meaning. Who knew what was possible?

Hopper shivered. The air was always cold. He could feel himself getting weaker with every day that went by. The mask he was wearing was beginning to fail, he knew it. If the gang didn't find him soon, there wouldn't be much of him left to find.

He stood up from where he was sitting. He would need to relocate soon. If he spent too much time in one spot, the creatures would find him. He had only been forced into a fight a handful of times, but

each time it got harder and harder to make it out alive.

I didn't survive hell for this long just to die now.

Where are you, El?

As he began to creep through the devastated and overgrown landscape, staying low to the ground as he did so, he thought back to his last few days on earth. He wasn't a man who often regretted things, but his last few days were full of them. The way he talked to Mike and El. The way he treated Joyce. At the very end, he thought that maybe they had known how he felt.

I spent so long trying to hide from who I was.

He thought back to the letter he had written Joyce, not ever expecting that she would read it. With any luck, she had found it, and now she knew the truth. He hoped El knew how proud he was of her and how she was like a daughter to him now.

I'll tell them. I swear to God, I'll tell them all. If I get out of here, I'll have that "heart to heart."

He told himself that. Yet he wasn't sure if he believed it. Could anyone really change like that? Or was he going to be stuck in the same loop that he had been in for his entire life, trapped behind the wall he had built after his daughter's death?

Doesn't matter, he thought. No one else dies.

No one, except, of course, maybe himself.

He raised his sidearm to eye-level, coming to a dead stop. There was something moving off to the side, something creeping along through the undergrowth that seemed to grow everywhere in this place. Hopper didn't want to waste any of his ammo if he didn't need to. Who knew when or if help would be coming?

He slowed his breathing and turned in a tight circle, trying to get a bead on whatever it was. Most of the creatures had been happy to give him a wide berth, particularly after he had blown away the first several that had come after him. There was definitely some kind of

intelligence here, though whether it was the Mind Flayer or just animal instinct, he couldn't say.

The rustling stopped and he unconsciously tensed. As soon as you couldn't see or hear them anymore, that was when you really needed to be careful.

Then it pounced.

The undergrowth exploded into a flurry of activity and three of the (goddammit) demodogs launched themselves at him, screeching as they flew towards him.

Hopper ducked and spun to the side, avoiding the closest one and firing into it as it went skidding past him. The dog he had hit let out an ear-piercing howl, and the other two redoubled the efforts, moving into a better position to attack the chief.

"Son of a *bitch*," growled Hopper. He knew he couldn't outrun them and if he fired his gun again, it would only attract more attention, which he was explicitly trying to avoid.

One of the dogs jumped. Hopper sidestepped, but not enough. The dog caught him in the shoulder, sending him spinning to the ground. Hopper hit the cracked ground hard, jolting his head and momentarily losing track of his surroundings.

The moment was enough. The dog was on him an instant, its flower-like mouth wide open and gaping, straining, trying to sink its countless teeth into Hopper.

Hopper pushed back, his hands around the monster's neck, using every ounce of his strength to keep the thing off him. He had seen what it had done to Bob Newby and he did not want to go out that way.

But it was strong, unnaturally strong. This was the closest one had ever been to him and he could smell its hot breath, feeling its skin against his.

I'm not going to die like this. El needs a father.

As soon as he had that thought, a switch flipped inside him. Hopper let out a wild scream and tossed the dog to the side, as he rolled over and picked up his gun. He fired three shots point blank into the dog's now closed mouth, then climbed to his feet to deal with the third and final one.

It was standing, crouched, looking at him with what he imagined might have been unease. "Come on, you flower-faced, bastard," Hopper whispered. "Let's do this."

But the demodog didn't advance. Instead, it backed up slowly, then scampered off into the shadowy undergrowth, leaving as quickly as it had come. Hopper watched it go, his gun still aimed, then he sat down heavily on the ground next to the corpse of the demodog, which was currently leaking black blood all over the ground.

"They better make a movie about me after this one," he muttered. "Tom Selleck'll play me. It'll be a hit. What do you think?" he asked, looking at the dead dog. "Oh, that's right. I shot you."

God, I miss them all.

As he slowly reloaded his weapon, he looked up at the sky, which was flashing with the same sick looking lightning that it was always filled with. He thought he saw—but no, that couldn't be right. His eyes were just playing tricks on him.

It was just that, when he squinted a certain way, it looked like there was something up there, watching him. Not the Mind Flayer. Something far worse.

As if it could get any worse than that. C'mon, El. Come and get me.

...Please.

...

When school started the next day, the rest of the party was annoyed but not surprised to see that Mike hadn't come in.

"I wonder how he pulled it off this time?" wondered Dustin.

Max shrugged. "He probably just said El was sick. That's what I would have done if I were him. Although let's be real, he's not smart enough to come up with that one on his own, so I bet Mrs. Byers thought of it for him."

"I wish he was here," said Lucas. "We need to start planning how we're going to get the chief back. We can't do that without him!"

Max looked at Lucas with distaste. "Seriously? If you think any of us are going to be involved in that, you're crazy. El is going to handle it all by herself, whether we want her to or not. I mean, what good would we be? He's in the Upside Down and we don't have anything to add. Remember what happened to Billy? That's what would happen to us."

Lucas squeezed his girlfriend's hand underneath the table. Even though Billy had been a horrible step-brother in addition to being a pretty terrible person most of the time, he had still been her family. And in the end, he had sacrificed himself to save all of them. She tried to pretend that things were fine, almost all the time, but she had admitted to Lucas more than once that she wished she could have had just one more chance to make things right with her brother. In the end, they would never know how much of him was fighting back against the Mind Flayer.

"Maybe you're right," said Dustin. "I mean, we're just kids. We'd just die."

Lucas was a little annoyed at their arguments. "What good would we do?" he asked. "After what we did to the Mind Flayer? There is *no* way anyone would have survived that if it hadn't been for all of us, working as a team!"

"This is different," said Max. "Didn't you see her when she came out of that trance? This isn't something that we can just tag along on. This is a different class of problem entirely."

"So what do we do?" asked Lucas. "Just wait?"

"Sometimes that's the hardest part," said Max.

She was right.

...

"So what do you want to do today?" asked Mike excitedly. Joyce was in the bathroom getting ready and Mike was feeling great after Joyce let him and El spend the night together. Sure, Joyce had been in the room, but still! Mike still knew to never mention this to Hopper. That would only end in tears. Tears and lots of yelling.

El was still in the process of waking up. Objectively, she looked extremely disheveled. To Mike, she looked perfect. "Hmm?" she said. "Why are you so *loud*?"

"I'm not loud! I'm just—" He stopped. Okay, maybe he was a little loud. "Sorry. I'm just really happy to be spending a day with you. A day when we can do anything we want!"

"I want food," croaked El. "And I want to wake up."

Mike chuckled. "We can make that happen."

"Mm," said El, before rolling back over. Mike couldn't keep himself from laughing as he got up.

Joyce came out of the bathroom, dressed looking ready to start the day. She smiled when she saw El hiding underneath the blankets.

"Is she always this bad in the morning?" asked Mike.

"She's turned into a late sleeper, that's for sure," said Joyce. "I don't think it can do too much harm though. She's making up for a lot of lost time. You looking for something to do today?"

Mike nodded. He wanted to have a special day with El, seeing as they so rarely got to spend time together now. "Why don't you take her on a hike?" suggested Joyce. "Ever since we moved, she's been trying to spend as much time outside as possible. Sometimes I think it's because she spent so much time locked up. She has a lot of years to make up for."

"Great idea!" said Mike. "But... where?"

"I know a few spots from back in the day," said Joyce, thinking. "You can get Jonathan to drive you. It'll be a great time!"

"Thanks, Mrs. Byers," said Mike. "And... thanks for taking such good care of her. There's no one else she'd rather be with."

"Oh, I don't know about that," said Joyce. "I'm sure there's a few."

"Best mom ever," piped up El from under the covers. "So much fun!"

Mike and Joyce laughed and Mike tossed a pillow at El. "Wake up! We're going to have such a good day!"

El shrugged the blankets off and sat up. "Food first."

...

Joyce had indeed given them a number of recommendations. Mike had picked the one that seemed the easiest to walk while still having some good views. He didn't want El to have to struggle to see anything and he didn't want to remind her of the tangled mess of the Upside Down. Even though she hadn't been stuck there like Will, it was still something that had powerfully affected her life.

El, for the most part, didn't seem to care. She just wanted to spend time with Mike. If that meant they go to do some things outside, even better. The particulars didn't matter. She was extra glad to be with him today because she didn't know how much more time she would have before she was forced to go into the Upside Down. She was constantly aware that for every minute she spent not rescuing Hopper was another minute he needed to survive in the most hellish place imaginable.

It was time to make a decision. She vowed to herself right then and there that this night she would make her first attempt at breaching to where Hopper was. She wouldn't tell anyone. Either nothing would happen, and there would be no point in upsetting them. Or it would work and they wouldn't be able to stop her. Both options suited her fine.

Jonathan drove them to the trail that Joyce had recommended and dropped them off, winking at them and telling them to have fun.

Mike had rolled his eyes and El had been a little confused at his reaction until she understood what Jonathan was implying.

He was a cool brother. He had shown her so many new and different things after they had moved, things that had taken her mind off how much she missed Mike and Hopper. He was caring towards her, but not overprotective. He knew what she was capable of. He knew she wasn't just a child.

El knew that Jonathan wasn't what a lot of people thought of as cool. To her, though, he was the coolest. He knew about so many things and he was different from everyone else! El knew she wasn't like everyone else and she knew she didn't want to be. Jonathan never pretended that he was anything other than what he was.

She was glad that he had found Nancy. He seemed happier when he talked about her, even if Mike still thought the whole situation was a little weird. Mike thought a lot of things were weird, though, especially when feelings were involved. Just not when it involved him and El.

"This is great!" said Mike as they walked away from where Jonathan had dropped them off.

El had to agree, it looked pretty nice. She wondered how Mike hadn't never heard about this before and concluded that it was because he hadn't gone on too many hikes with the rest of the party before she had come along. It just hadn't been their kind of thing.

The path was easy to follow, but that didn't make it any less of a cool experience. There were low hanging trees that seemed to have been bent down by the force of gravity, forming a "hallway" of foliage over their heads and all around them.

"I love it," said El, who couldn't stop looking around them with wonder. She had never seen anything like it. "How does it happen?"

Mike didn't know. "Dustin might be able to tell you," he said. "It's pretty cool though, isn't it?"

"Yeah," she said, her eyes wide. "Pretty cool."

The trail seemed to loop around for awhile. Mike had to admit, it was the perfect choice. Mrs. Byers had really helped them out. Eventually, they both wanted to take a break and decided to stop by a stream that was lined with huge rocks. They both sat down on a rock to watch the water.

"You really like the outdoors, then, huh?" asked Mike.

El nodded. "It's so... big."

It made sense. She had spent so much of her life trapped inside, it was only natural that she would want to get away from the indoors now. "We can do this more often if you want!" he said. He wanted to do whatever he could to make her happy and give her what she needed.

"I'd like that."

They sat listening to the sound of the water going by for a little before Mike had another thought. "El, when we get Hopper back... what do you think is going to happen? Are you going to come back here?"

El frowned. "I don't know. I like living with the Byers. But Hopper is my dad. I think I would like to live with him."

Mike felt his heart soar, but he didn't want to celebrate too early. "Even though Hopper thought it was best you leave?"

"If he comes back, I think it will be safe again. And with my powers..." Her voice trailed off and

she smiled at Mike. "And I want to be with you."

"I want to be with you too," said Mike, who felt like his heart was going to burst.

She leaned her head on his shoulder. "Thanks for bringing me here," she said.

"Of course! I—"

But Mike's words were cut off by a strange sound that the two of them heard emanating from the trees on the other side of the stream, where the foliage was thick enough to block their view.

"What was that?" asked Mike. It was an unpleasant sound, almost like something being torn in half. Something that was not meant to be easily torn.

El stood up faster than Mike did. Her body was immediately tensed and Mike noticed that her fists were clenched. "What is it?" asked Mike.

"You should go back," said El, staring at where the sound had come from.

"Are you kidding me?" asked Mike as he climbed to his feet. "Absolutely not!"

El didn't argue with him. She knew that no matter what she said, she was not going to convince him. "Dangerous," she said, but added nothing else. Mike could make his own decisions in the same way she could.

They stepped into the stream. It wasn't deep at all, but it was moving quickly and it soaked their shoes in an instant. The sound was continuing, a slow, slow, ripping sound, that was clearly coming from beyond the trees.

El found herself holding her breath and she released it in a rush. Part of her knew exactly what this was, and the other part was hoping against hope that she was wrong. Mike looked confused, like he hadn't quite figured it out yet, but El remembered Dustin's story.

As they left the stream and breached the trees, the sound grew louder. The air felt like it was wavering around them and El began to develop a sick feeling in the pit of her stomach.

"El? What is that?"

And then they could see it, and El knew that Dustin hadn't been exaggerating. She knew that she needed to rescue Hopper before this got any worse. Something was coming.

"El..."

She turned around to see Mike staggering, before he collapsed to his knees. His eyes were red and there were tears streaming out of them. "El, what's happening?"

She felt a wave of sickness wash over her as she stared at the tear in space that was hovering right in front of them. There was something on the other side, something dark and vile, hovering just outside of her normal range of viewing.

"Mike, stay here," she said. He didn't argue. She wanted to go comfort him, but she could feel the aura of the tear beginning to affect her, and she didn't know how much longer she had left to be able to fight it.

She stepped right next to the tear, trying to look braver than she felt. She felt like she was going to be sick, going to burst into tears, going to start screaming and run away. She needed to be strong. For Mike. For Hopper. For everyone she loved and cared about.

El peered into the breach. And what she saw made her blood run cold.

It was an eye. A gigantic, yellow, diseased-looking eyeball staring back at her from the other side. She couldn't see much else, but she could sense the malevolence emanating from it. This was the voice. This was the *thing* that had spoken to her in her dreams.

"Leave us alone!" El shouted at it.

The eye did nothing. It did not even blink.

El thrust at the portal with all of her power, hoping to shove the eye back. There was no effect. She might as well not have even bothered.

Behind her, she could hear Mike sobbing. The aura of the tear was growing stronger, and she could feel her knees shaking.

"I will kill you," hissed El through gritted teeth.

The eye focused on her for another moment, then seemed to drop out

of sight. The feeling of horror and revulsion began to slowly fade, and El felt like she could breathe again. She turned back to Mike, who was on his knees, clutching his head, breathing heavily.

"Mike!" she ran back to him, holding his face in her hands. "Are you okay?"

He hesitated, then shook his head no. She hugged him tightly. "Everything is going to be okay," she said. "I promise."

He looked at her, his eyes wide and full of tears. "Is that what it was like?" he whispered.

She didn't understand. "What?"

"Being locked up by those people. Is that what it felt like?"

She nodded, because on the worst days, that was exactly what it felt like.

He sobbed once and hugged her tighter. "I'm so sorry."

She wished that she could stay longer. She wished she could sit here with him and hold him until he was okay. She wished that this had never happened and they could just enjoy the rest of their day together. But she couldn't. She knew what she needed to do.

"I love you, Mike," she said. She kissed him once on the forehead and once on the lips. "I will be back soon. I promise."

It was a promise she didn't know that she could keep, but she made it anyway.

She turned away from Mike so that he couldn't see the fear that she knew was in her eyes. There was only one thing left for her to do now, and it would change everything. She steeled herself and walked to the portal, which was still open, though closing slightly.

El held out a hand and concentrated. The tear in space began to grow wider and wider, opening up to the point where she could easily step through it. She felt her head throb and a trail of hot wetness emerge from her nose.

She turned around to take one last look at Mike. He was watching her with an expression of desperation and helpless, because he knew exactly what she was going to do next.

"Please..." he said, and the implication was obvious. *Please don't go to that place again. I can't lose you.*

"I'm sorry," she said. "I have to." She took in Mike's face for one more moment. "I love you."

Then she stepped forward into the tear and was surrounded by two things—absolute darkness and the sound of Mike's helpless scream of denial as she vanished from sight, disappearing into the Upside Down.

6. Chapter 6: The Encounter

Leaving Mike just sitting there had been one of the hardest things that El could ever imagine doing, but she knew it needed to be done. If she didn't go in, who knew what would happen next? Maybe the next portal would be bigger or longer-lasting. Maybe something would come through it. She shuddered when she remembered the future vision she had seen, of the desolate world full of nothing but ash and decay. She needed to rescue Hopper he had been on his own for long enough. It was time to bring her dad home.

That didn't make her feel any better about what she had just done to Mike. She knew just how hard it had been on him when she had disappeared after defeating the demogorgon the first time. And she knew what it must have looked like for her to step back into the Upside Down. Like she was abandoning him all over again. It didn't matter. She needed to do this and she would apologize to him when she returned. She hated hurting him, but Hopper needed her right now more than her boyfriend did. Mike would understand. He always managed to somehow understand.

She had only been inside the Upside Down briefly before, but she had seen inside of it plenty of times. It looked much the same as it had then. Dark and foreboding with a constant feeling that something terrible was only just out of sight. The sky was the same awful color that it always was, with silent lightning flashing across it here and there.

Hopper had been here for months. How had he done it? Just standing there made her feel unwell. She knew that her powers gave her a certain resistance against the atmosphere of the Upside Down, but for how long that would last, she didn't know. She needed to find him.

Behind her, the portal closed. It brought her a moment of panic as she realized that was her only way out. She forced herself to calm down, telling herself that she would either find another way out or she would make one.

El closed her eyes and focused. The energy of this place was powerful, almost overwhelmingly so. It would focus her abilities and

allow her to—

I can see him.

He wasn't far from where she was. Hopper was sitting, looking dirty and exhausted, a damaged breathing mask on his face, obscuring most of his features. Her heart swelled with love as she watched him reload his weapon and sigh heavily. He was an angry, quick-tempered grump of a man. But he was also clever, resourceful, and capable of far quicker thinking than almost anyone she had ever met. He was her dad.

I'm coming for you.

In her mind's eye, Hopper looked up and scanned the area around him, as if he had heard her. She hoped that he had. She wanted to give him any hope that she could. If he would just keep fighting for a little longer, she would be there to rescue him.

El steeled herself and then set off into the unknown.

...

"She just left me there," said Mike, who was huddled on the corner of the couch in the Wheeler basement. Jonathan had picked him up and taken him straight there so that Mike could be with the rest of the party. Jonathan had then rushed back to tell his mom, who was sure to be panicked and upset. "I know why she did it, but..."

Dustin put his hand on his friend's shoulder. "I'm sorry, man. You know she wouldn't have done it unless she had to."

"I know," said Mike. "It's just... what if something happens to her over there? She's all alone. And we can't do anything to help her!"

Max spoke softly. "You know what she can do. You know how strong she is, even without her powers. And now that her powers are back, she'll be unstoppable."

"I just don't want her to be alone," Mike said sadly.

They heard the front door open upstairs, along with raised voices.

"What the hell...?" muttered Lucas.

And then there were footsteps coming hammering down the basement stairs. It was Mrs. Byers along with Will.

"What happened?" demanded Mrs. Byers, looking like she had just finished crying. "Where's El?"

Mike, who had already explained the whole situation to Jonathan, explained it again to Mrs. Byers. She stood there, her hand over her mouth in horror at what Mike was telling her. "She just left?" whispered Mrs. Byers. "She just went into that place on her own?"

"She went to get Hopper," said Mike. "I couldn't stop her. I felt the same thing Dustin did. It was the worst thing I've ever felt..."

"What's causing it?" asked Will. "Did you see anything?"

"I couldn't get close enough," said Mike. "She walked right up to it, but I could see her fighting it. I think whatever her powers are can give her a little bit of protection from it."

"Was it just the Upside Down?" asked Lucas. "I mean, you saw what it did to Will after he was in there."

Mike shook his head. "No way. He had to be in there for weeks before it had that much of an effect on him. This was instant. Like standing near it was slowly killing me."

"There must be something in the portal," said Max. "Something that wasn't there before."

"Can we focus on the fact that this means the Upside Down is opening up again?" said Dustin. "Because I'm pretty sure we all thought we didn't need to deal with that anymore. And now here it is! What are we going to do about it?"

It was a good point. The party had been so focused on El's disappearance that they hadn't even considered the larger implications of everything that was happening.

"It's not natural," said Mike. "It can't be. El opened the portal the first

time, then the government, then the Russians. It doesn't just open on its own. That means there has to be someone doing it."

"Or something," added Lucas.

"Or something. This time though, it's different. It's not being opened from our side, at least it doesn't seem like it. It's opening from the other side. Whatever is doing this is doing it from the Upside Down."

Mrs. Byers stepped in. "We need to tell the government about this. They'll step in and take care of it. I won't let you kids put yourself at more risk."

"What about El?" asked Mike. "I thought the whole point was to keep her away from them."

Mrs. Byers bit her lip. "I mean, we were more concerned about the Russians than anyone else... and if they saw us come back, I'm sure the Americans did too. They just don't know El has her powers back now. Which is all that really matters."

Mike, for a moment, found himself regretting El's return to Hawkins. Yes, he had missed her more than he had ever missed anything in his life, but at least she had been *safe*. All this madness with foreign armies and even their own country... the girl deserved some peace.

Max spoke up then, thoughtfully and slowly. "I think we need to trust her, guys. Panicking and telling people what happened won't help. How would they even manage to get to the Upside Down? It's up to El to bring Hopper back. All we can really do is wait."

Max was right. Mike hated it, but it was true anyway. They couldn't help her. All they could do was be there for each other until the moment when El came limping back to them with Hopper. Mike tried not to think about the fact that he might not ever see El again.

She'll make it through. She always does.

...

The American had made his way to Hawkins, Indiana. Travel via interdimensional portal was rough on the human body, and the entity

that was now controlling the American knew that. It had taken a little time to acclimate to the stress that had been undergone when moving between the two worlds.

Now, though, it was time to clean up loose ends. The American (or the entity, because now, the two were one and the same) knew that the last remnant of the Russian occupation in Hawkins had made a move against the girl. This was unacceptable. If the girl was injured, the plan would fail, and the plan could not be allowed to fail. The time for the reunion of worlds was close at hand. The girl had foolishly decided to step between the barrier, all out of some misguided attempt to help her surrogate father.

But before that could happen, the Russian contingent in Hawkins could not be allowed to operate anymore. It needed to be shut down so that they could no longer make any attempts on the girl's life.

Ironic, how the dimensional beings had been thwarted by the girl time and time again, only for him to decide to save her life. It was pathetically easy how he was able to walk right into the Russian safe houses and eviscerate every soldier that crossed his path. Even their guns and weapons were meaningless against him. He almost found his actions redundant—surely the girl could defend herself against these weaklings. But it was better to leave nothing to chance, because this girl was the only one who was capable of having the effect that he so badly needed.

This house was no different. Little more than a shack built in the woods outside of Hawkins, the American threw open the door without a hint of caution. The Russians lifted their guns in an attempt to retaliate, but there was no point. The American simply lifted a hand and watched the bullets slam into the wall next to him. He then proceeded to advance on the men, as he enjoyed their helpless screams and the sprays of blood that drenched the room as he tore the men apart.

"W-why are you doing this?" one of the men gasped in Russian.

The American smiled, his lips curling cruelly. "Because it is necessary. Because it is what must be done."

...

El began to make her way through the twisted landscape, wondering if she had made a mistake. Yes, her powers had returned, but she was out of practice. She hadn't been in a situation like this for months. She had been living peacefully with her new family, trying to forget about the hell she had gone through.

No, forget was the wrong word. She was trying to move on from it in a healthy way, the way Hopper had talked about in the letter he had written for her. That didn't include training to survive life and death situations. It meant trying to lead the most normal life she could.

Thus far, this venture into the Upside Down had gone relatively uneventful. She had not seen anything alive and the Mind Flayer seemed to either not have noticed that she was there or perhaps was not in a position to move against her. Maybe it was even dead.

While she walked, she made certain to keep an eye open for whatever it was that had been staring at her through the portal. She knew that whatever it was, it wanted her to come through, which meant this was a trap. She could practically hear Hopper's voice in her ear. "Doesn't matter if it's a trap, as long we know it's one. Then when they spring it... we're ready!"

She smiled to herself. She couldn't wait to hear his voice again. She didn't even care if he yelled at her and Mike. She just wanted to see her dad again.

But first, she had to find him. The image she had received in her mind's eye had been clear, and as far as she knew, seemed to be close to where she currently was. The problem was that she couldn't just start shouting his name. Who knew what sort of unwanted attention that would attract? She remembered his one rule, his biggest piece of advice: don't be stupid.

El needed to be smart. Every time she felt like she was losing her way in the Upside Down, she would stop, find cover, close her eyes, and focus on Hopper. Slowly, she was drawing a map in her head that would lead her to him. He was moving as well, and there was something that was preventing her from simply contacting him via

her thoughts, but that was okay. She was moving faster than him and would catch up with him soon enough.

Why was he moving slowly? Was he hurt? No, he could have just been tired. Right? That's all it was. No one could manage to take her dad in a fight. She had seen him and she knew that no one wanted to mess with him if they didn't have to.

But he had been here for a long time... maybe the Upside Down had taken a toll on him.

As she stopped and closed her eyes again, she saw that Hopper was sitting down, leaning up against what looked like a ruined building. He was breathing heavily and clutching his side. He looked far thinner than he had the last time she had seen him in person. El hoped that he was taking care of himself as best he could, even though she knew that in a place like this, it wouldn't have been much.

She pushed out with her mind, trying to reach him, trying to offer him a bit of reassurance. It was like there was a wall separating her mind from his and she didn't understand where it was coming from. She pushed against it, straining with every ounce of her power—

El felt something give way. A tiny trickle of blood emerged from her nose and she knew that she had made a breakthrough.

"It's me," she said. "If you can hear me, stay where you are. I'll be there soon. I promise. I love you."

In her head, Hopper looked up, a stunned expression on his face, like he had given up any hope of ever seeing his adopted daughter ever again. He looked around and his lips moved, but the only sound that El could hear sounded almost like static. She knew it was because of whatever was causing the interference, and it didn't worry her. She had a huge smile on her face. She was close, and she would see him soon!

She opened her eyes and rose to her feet, starting to move faster in the right direction. She had to restrain herself from running. Even with the horrors of the Upside Down all around her, she was filled

with hope. Hopper was so close and soon she would bring her hero back to the real world. Where he belonged.

She was so excited that she didn't notice the figures creeping towards her on either side until it was too late. She only caught sight of them when the first one stalked into her path, a good fifty feet in front of her, hobbling into view from out of one of the destroyed buildings that would have been so vibrant in the real world.

El came to a dead stop. The figures were not moving quickly, but the way they were dragging their feet towards her made her stomach turn. There was something familiar about them, familiar in a way that made her feel sick.

The future Hopper, she thought. *From the vision*. She shuddered they were walking in the same way that Hopper had when she had seen the ashy landscape that had been filled with nothing.

They shuffled closer to her, saying nothing, making no noise. As they drew within her eyesight, she finally could see what they were, and she felt her stomach flip. The shambling figures were people, or at least approximations of people. They looked like their skin was melting wax, their features stretched and distorted in ways that people's faces were not meant to stretch.

El took an involuntary step back, only to turn and realize that there were some approaching her from behind as well. "S-stay back," she said, trying to sound more confident than she felt. She utterly failed.

The figures continued to approach. Soon they were all within eyesight. "Stay back!"

They didn't listen and El knew she was going to have to defend herself. The only defenses she possessed were her powers. She wasn't like Hopper or Steve; she couldn't just punch things until they fell down.

El raised her hand and concentrated. One of the bodies went careening limply through the sky, but more were advancing on her. She threw two more to the side—and then noticed that the first one she had sent flying was now beginning to approach her again, having

lifted itself up from the ground and getting back on its feet.

"No..." El whispered. She spun in a circle, looking for a way out. There was none. She raised a hand and screamed, putting all her force into one mighty blow. She could feel the blood running more freely down her face but didn't care. She didn't have time to worry about that. She ran forward, as hard as she could, through the small opening she had blasted into the wall of bodies that was beginning to surround her.

As she ran past the ones that were still standing, she heard a noise. It was quiet, and she wouldn't have been able to hear it had she not been right next to them, but the sound chilled her blood. It was whispering, harsh quiet noises that were coming from where there should have been mouths on the melting faces. The words were slurred, unclear, but there was one phrase she could hear, over and over:

"Kill us."

But then she was running too fast, and her legs couldn't keep up with her brain, and she was tumbling end over end, skidding onto the ground, scraping up her palms and knees. She could hear the whispering growing louder and louder, and she spun herself over, scrambling backwards, trying to escape them.

There were too many and they were advancing too quickly, inexorably towards her, hissing their terrible whispered phrases. El screamed. She couldn't help it.

Her screams were drowned out by the sound of gunshots, rolling over the desolate landscape like thunder. The shots kept coming, individual deafening cracks and then a pause, followed by the blast of an automatic weapon.

And then there was more screaming, but it wasn't coming from her. It was louder, deeper, the voice of a man. It was the voice of a man that she had heard before, but not for months.

"Get away from daughter!"

It was Hopper.

El watched as the bodies of the disfigured humans hit the ground, holes in their heads, but no blood leaking from where the wounds were. She picked herself up and climbed to her feet, backing away from where the bodies were now once again struggling to rise.

"El!" Hopper shouted. "This way, let's go!"

She followed him without a word. Words weren't necessary, not now. The two of them ran together, away from limping, twisted things that had nearly ended her life.

When they were out of sight of whatever the creatures had been, Hopper stopped and bent over, hands on his knees, trying to catch his breath. "Jesus," he said. "You think I'd be in better shape after all of that."

He pulled the mask off his face and El got the first good look at her father in months. His face was thinner and his eyes had dark, heavy circles underneath them. El looked at him with her eyes wide, then ran to him and threw her arms around him. She was sobbing.

"I'm sorry," she said. "We didn't know you were still alive. I would have come sooner."

Hopper pulled her close, his voice tight, like he was choked. Was he crying too? "You don't ever need to apologize to me, kid. You're here now, and that's all that matters."

"I missed you," she said. "I missed you every day."

"I missed you too. But you know what? I always knew that one day, I was going to look up and see you standing there, and God help anyone who got in your way."

"You saved me," she said.

Hopper shook his head and wiped his eyes. "No, kid, trust me. *You* saved *me*."

They had found each other and it felt like something had unclenched

inside El's chest. The pain that had been following her around for so long, even in the moments when she thought she was fine, was gone. It didn't matter that they were still in the Upside Down. It didn't matter that they had no plan at all to escape this terrible place. All that mattered was that they were together again.

"How'd you find me?" Hopper asked, after the two of them were sitting down, catching their breath. He had offered her the mask, but she had declined, telling him that he had been here far longer and needed it more than she did right now.

"My powers came back," she said. "They went away I fought the Mind Flayer. But then the Russians found us again and tried to hurt Mike and—"

"Woah, woah, woah," said Hopper. "You were with Mike? I thought you were going to leave Hawkins..." His voice trailed off, as if he had said too much.

"You knew?" asked El, frowning. Then she understood. "You told Mrs. Byers to take me away."

Hopper deflated. Once, he might have raised his voice, claiming that everything he did was for her, and that he was only trying to keep her safe. Now, he just didn't have the energy. "Yeah. I did. I thought it'd keep you away from whoever was still watching Hawkins. Because there were still watchers, believe me. I'm sorry. I should have let you make that choice on your own. I should have done a lot differently."

And once, El might have agreed, might have raged against her adopted father, telling him that she could make her own choices and that he didn't have to treat her like a child. Now, though, she saw wisdom in what Hopper was saying.

"Thank you for trying to take care of me," she said. "Even when you weren't there."

Hopper looked at her, and there was pride in his eyes. "Maybe we both got a little wiser, huh, kid?"

"Maybe," she said, with a smile.

She wished that she could sit there with him and just talk, not having to worry about what came next, just taking the time to be with him, something that she had regretted not being able to do before the Starcourt incident. They just didn't have the time. For all she knew, those creatures could be on their way towards them right now, not to mention the potential existence of a demogorgon or a pack of demodogs.

Hopper noticed El looking around anxiously and stood up before she needed to say anything. "Plenty of time to catch up later, right? Better get moving. You have a plan in mind?"

She wished she did. "I need to open another portal."

Hopper frowned. "How are you going to do that?"

El didn't know. "Try as hard as I can."

Hopper knew he should be disappointed by this lack of a plan, but he didn't feel that way at all. He was just happy to see her again. He promised himself he would never abandon her again, no matter what it took.

"Should we go back to where we came from?" asked Hopper. "We'd have to go through those things again, but if we moved quickly, we might make it. It might be easier for you to leave the same way you came in."

"I don't think it works like that," said El. "We shouldn't go back."

She knew this beyond a doubt. She wasn't sure how she knew, but it was probably due to the fact that those creatures were unlike anything she had ever seen before, outside of the terrible vision that she had experienced. They were tied to the voice that had been in her head, the thing that had been haunting her since Starcourt. And that needed to be avoided at all costs.

"Okay," said Hopper. "I can work with that. Forward, then?"

Truthfully, El didn't know what to look for. A portal would be ideal,

but she doubted that the voice in her head was just going to open an exit for them from the Upside Down. She just nodded and the two set out.

One of the things she had always liked the most about Hopper was that he understood the value of quiet. He didn't force conversation on her, and he didn't try to talk to her when he had nothing of value to say. She appreciated that. The world was such a loud place and Hopper knew how to be strong without having to be loud at the same time.

More people should be like that, she thought.

As they walked, she noticed that Hopper kept his gun out at all times. She wondered what sort of things he must have seen during his time here.

"Did anything ever talk to you here?" she asked.

Hopper was confused. "Talk to me? Like with words?"

"Yes... but not with talking."

"Are you asking me if I'm hearing voices in my head?" Hopper asked.

"I guess?"

"I've got a lot of issues, kid, but that isn't one of them." He paused. "Wait, does that mean *you've* been hearing voices? What's been going on out there?"

"Can we talk about it later?" asked El.

Hopper sighed. "Once I'd have said yes, but now, who knows if we're even going to get a later."

"I don't want to talk about it right now," said El, her tone adamant. "After."

"Okay, kid. Whatever makes you happy."

She didn't have time to be happy. As the two of them walked side by

side, something opened in front of them. It wasn't just a portal; it was far more than a simple passage to another world. It was like someone had torn off the page of reality they were walking on, revealing the page that lay behind it. One moment their feet were in the Upside Down—then the next step they took put them somewhere else entirely.

"El?" Hopper turned around to see if the world had in fact changed as much as it seemed to have. Unfortunately, his suspicions were proven true. "What the hell's going on?"

El had a terrible feeling that she knew exactly what this was.

The land around them looked utterly alien. It wasn't the destroyed and deteriorated landscape of the Upside Down. It was something else entirely. Strange structures were on the horizon, curved shapes that looked like nothing she had ever seen before. There was a heavy mist covering everything, and the only reason she could even see the horizon was because the structures were so massive that they towered above the fog.

Hopper squinted, covering his eyes, trying to make out any more than the tiny bit that he could see.

El felt very small and very scared. "We need to leave," she said.

"Yeah," said Hopper, "I kinda figured. But how?"

El looked up in the sky and let out a muffled scream.

Hopper followed her gaze and saw what had caused her reaction. He felt his knees go weak and his stomach flip. In all the time he spent in the Upside Down, nothing had looked like this. Not even the Mind Flayer, in his limited interactions with it in the real world had come close.

It was massive, eclipsing so much of the sky that it almost seemed like the sky was a much darker color.

"Jesus Christ," breathed Hopper. "El, what is that?"

El couldn't say anything. It was like her voice was trapped in her

throat, and wouldn't come out, no matter how hard she tried. The thing in the sky was so big that she couldn't get a good view of what it really was, the only thing was apparent was the fact that it was covered in eyes. Countless eyes, eyes the size of houses, lined the body of the monstrosity in the sky.

El was trembling and Hopper saw it.

"Okay, kid, time to go." He put an arm around her and started hurrying her off into the mist, trying hard to not let his fear and sense of helplessness show.

At last. You have arrived.

The voice pierced the heads of both Hopper and El, ringing around the inside of their skulls and causing the hair on their arms to stand on end.

Sentiment will be your downfall. I have watched you humans crawl out of the mud and you will never be anything other than entirely predictable.

Hopper grabbed his head. The voice felt like snakes twisting inside his brain, boring holes in places that nothing should have been. It brought back every terrible memory he had ever experienced. It brought him back to Sara's deathbed, to the destruction of his marriage. It made him feel like the world was ending, like nothing would be right ever again.

He looked at El and saw her standing there, glaring at the sky with defiance in her eyes, and for just one moment, the terrible emotions that were filling every fiber of his being were gone, replaced with nothing but pride.

You will be mine, said the voice. *And all will be as it must.*

Hopper pointed his gun at the colossal thing filling the sky, knowing that it was a futile action. He could not harm it any more than he could perceive what it truly was.

"*What do you want?*" screamed El at the sky, which was beginning to shift between dark shades of purple and orange.

You will come to see in time. By then it will be too late.

"We're leaving," hissed Hopper through gritted teeth. "Let's go."

El wanted to but knew Hopper's words were just bluster. They were helpless in the face of whatever was in the sky above them.

Soon the worlds will be one and my prison will be demolished. There will be nothing to hold back the way that nature was always intended to be.

"Go," said Hopper.

"Where?" asked El, her voice frantic.

"I don't know," said Hopper. "Just go. We need to get out of there."

The two turned and started to run back the way they came from. It was futile, El knew. Where could they go? This entire world, wherever it was, was under the control of the thing in the sky above them. There was nowhere to run to. Wherever they went, it would be there, above them, staring down at them with each of its seemingly limitless eyes.

El needed to get away—somewhere, anywhere but here. She couldn't let Hopper be subjected to this, not after she had just found him and pulled him out of the Upside Down.

They ran until their lungs burned. Until their legs screamed. And it seemed like the mist might have gone, might have dissipated. They could see around them, they could make out more of the landscape that they were running through.

El screamed and immediately wished that the mist was still there.

The ground they were walking on was a horrible organic color and shade, the color of bruised flesh mixed with some sort of plant life. And she could see in the distance, on the ground, not too far away, was another eye, just like the one she had seen staring into the portal at her and Mike.

She collapsed to her knees and threw her head back, staring up at the sky, overwhelmed by helplessness and terror. There was nowhere

they could go. There was nothing they could do. They would die here, so close to freedom, trapped somewhere she couldn't even begin to understand.

She could see now that the thing in the sky and the ground were one and the same. The ground she stood on was the being that was speaking to her. There was no escape because it *was* everywhere, all of the world around her was the terrible, painful, dark thing,

Hopper took a moment to notice that she had fallen to the ground, and he turned around to return to her. "Get up!" he urged. "C'mon, El, we have to go!"

"We can't!" she sobbed, her voice breaking. "*I can't!*"

All of her frustration and helplessness and fear came pouring out of her at once. Her power rushed out of her like a dam breaking and the ground began to shake. Hopper tried to keep his balance, but ended up on his knees, trying to shield El with his arms.

"I got you," he said. "I got you. Everything is going to be okay."

What El couldn't see was that behind them, more of the misshapen towers were beginning to rise out of the ground. They were not towers. Had she looked, she would have seen that they were tentacles, massive and covered in gargantuan eyeballs.

Hopper shielded his screaming daughter as the tentacles drew nearer. The ground began to shake harder and harder.

He closed his eyes.

"I love you," he said.

And then there was nothing at all.

...

Mike couldn't sleep. For all he knew, El was fighting for her life *right now*. How was he supposed to sleep when the person he loved the most in the world was risking her life? And how could everyone be so calm? He felt sick.

When he finally did drift off, it wasn't for long. His sleep was interrupted by a jolt, a sudden flash of an image in his mind and the sound of someone's voice: El's. He bolted up out of bed, her voice still ringing in his ears. He couldn't tell what she had been saying, but one thing was clear—she was in desperate trouble.

Mike ran out of his room and pounded on Nancy's door. "Nancy! Please! Wake up!"

There was a pause and then the door opened, revealing Nancy standing there in her pajamas looking like she was half-asleep. "Mike? What's going on?"

"I need you to drive me out to the place where I went hiking with El. I *know* it sounds crazy but she needs help *right now!*"

Nancy opened her mouth to argue and then thought better of it. She thought of all the times that something utterly crazy and inexplicable had happened. She thought of how she had felt when no one believed her. And she thought about how she would feel if she thought Jonathan needed help.

"Alright," she said. "Let me get dressed.

They were out of the house in less than ten minutes.

...

Nancy broke just about every speed limit on the way to the trail. Mike didn't need to ask her to, she just knew that it needed to be done. Truth be told, she had felt something strange that night, like a chill on the back of her neck, the feeling that someone was watching her, or maybe creeping up close behind her. She didn't know if that had anything to do with El, but given how Mike was acting, it seemed likely.

They parked and pulled out their flashlights, then ran into the trail. It didn't take Mike long to pick his way to where El had stepped away from him. As they shone their flashlights about the pitch darkness, Mike's beam illuminated a huddled figure, far too big to be El.

Mike squinted in the gloom, letting the light shine on the hunched

figure.

Chief Jim Hopper was sitting on the ground, El curled up against him, her eyes shut tightly, her face stained with tears.

"Hey, kid," said Hopper. "Now that's how you do a rescue mission."

7. Chapter 7: The Calm

Joyce couldn't help from bursting into tears when she saw who was at her hotel door in the middle of the night. She stood in the doorway, her hand covering her mouth, trying to hold in her sobs and failing. Then she ran forward and threw her arms around Hopper, whose eyes were red and was standing on unsteady legs.

"You came back," she said, through her tears. Part of her had known he was going to, but the other part had been convinced that such a thing happening was impossible and that hope was futile.

"You thought I was going to let something like being trapped in another dimension keep me away?" said Hopper. "I'm a little embarrassed."

El was leaning on Mike's shoulder, looking like she was barely managing to hold onto consciousness.

"Where were you?" asked Joyce, her tears still pouring. "What happened?"

"I had two options," said Hopper. "Get incinerated or jump into the Upside Down. I took the jump. I figured at worst, I least had a chance."

Joyce stepped back from Hopper, her hands still on his shoulders. "You're so thin!"

"Didn't exactly have all the coffee and donuts I wanted over there," said Hopper. "Don't worry, I'll be back to my normal self."

"Come in," said Joyce. "Please, come in, sit down."

"If it's all the same to you," said Hopper. "If we could hit up a twenty-four hour diner, that'd be great. I would just about kill for a burger right now."

Joyce half-laughed, half-sobbed. Hopper was back. Maybe everything would be okay.

...

The American punched the wall of the Russian hideout that he was standing in. It wasn't that he had failed his mission. This was, in fact, the last Russian hideout and there was not a single soldier left standing.

It was that the girl had been so close—the key to everything had been within their grasp, and she had slipped out unscathed. *Somehow*. She shouldn't have been able to vanish like that. The only explanation was that her powers were continuing to develop at an exponential rate. This would require revised calculations. It changed nothing, and if anything, actually sped up the timetable for the plan. The stronger she was, the easier it would be for her to connect the worlds and return reality to its natural state.

The American breathed deeply, trying to calm himself. He envisioned what it would look like once the plan was complete. It would be beautiful chaos, a return to the true state of things. Things had changed far too much from what they were meant to be, and those changes were unacceptable.

He pictured the void. The beautiful, horrific void, the all-consuming mess of colors that would soon be everywhere. Yes, humanity would no longer exist in such a form. But that was okay. Humanity was an aberration that should never have existed in the first place. The natural order needed to be restored.

The American pondered what that meant for himself. True, he would perish as well. Perhaps that was for the best. It was the entity inside that deserved life. Deserved existence. If the American died—*when* the American died, all would be as it should be.

But first, they needed that damned girl.

Thinking about her caused his blood pressure to rise yet again. How could she even *think* to thwart the natural way of things? It was blasphemous. It was every shade of wrong.

She wouldn't stay on her own forever. Soon he would find her and show her the glory that she was meant for—the whole reason her

powers existed.

Soon.

...

Hopper was sitting next to Joyce, keeping an apprehensive eye on Mike and El, who were sitting opposite them in the booth of the twenty-four hour diner they were at. El was leaning her head on Mike's shoulder, still looking like she was half-asleep. Hopper could hardly blame her after what they had just done through.

Understandably, Joyce had a lot of questions. Where had he been? How had El gotten back to him? How had they gotten back out?

"I don't know how she found," said Hopper. "I heard her voice and I knew she must have been looking for me in her head. I had no idea her powers were gone but that explained why it took so long for her to look for me. Part of me hoped it was just because she had moved on, but I should have known better than that."

"You survived in there on your own for that long?" Joyce's eyes were wide with disbelief. She hadn't removed her hand from Hopper's since they had entered the diner.

"Didn't really have a choice," said Hopper. The waiter came and placed a plate in front of Hopper. There was a massive burger with a huge pile of fries next to it. "Thanks."

"I just... are you okay?"

Hopper looked at his burger. Was he okay? It was a huge question, and one that he didn't really have an answer for. He almost offered another flippant response before he remembered who he was talking to. "Don't really know, Joyce. But I do know that I thought about—" He almost said 'you' until he glanced across the table and saw Mike and El still sitting there. He internally grimaced at what one of them might say at *that* kind of admission, and rapidly changed his answer. "—this burger every single day I was in there, so right now I'm feeling pretty good."

Mike shifted uncomfortably in his seat. "Do you guys mind if we get

some air?" he asked.

"Just don't go too far," said Joyce. Then, remembering that Hopper was El's guardian, glanced at him. "I mean, as long as it's okay with you?"

"That's fine," said Hopper, mouth full of burger. "What she said."

As the two kids left, Joyce gave Hopper a more serious look. "How are you really?" she asked. "You don't have to pretend with me."

Ah. She wanted to have a heart-to-heart. Just because he had survived numerous near-death experiences did not mean he was in any way prepared for that sort of thing. "I don't know," he said. "Honestly. But I thought of you every single day. I thought about things I should have done differently, or things I should have said to you. And I told myself that when I saw you again, there was one thing I was going to make very clear, right away."

"What's that?"

Hopper put his burger down and turned so that he could focus on Joyce. "That I'm sorry. I acted like an idiot. Actually, no, wait, that's wrong. I didn't act like an idiot; I *was* an idiot. I probably still am an idiot. I'm still learning. I'm always going to be me, and goddamn, I am always going to be imperfect. But if you think you can deal with me, I'd be happy to try and figure out how to be less of an idiot with you."

Joyce smiled and found that once again, there were tears in her eyes. "Jim Hopper, are you asking me out?"

"Woah," said Hopper. "Those are some strong words. I'm just asking if you—wait, what day is it?"

"Tuesday," said Joyce, not seeing where this was going.

"I'm just asking if you'd like to get dinner at Enzo's. Just me and you. Wednesday, at 7?"

"You'll pick me up?"

"I'll pick you up," confirmed Hopper.

Joyce's smile was huge. "It's a date."

...

"What do you think they're talking about in there?" Mike asked El, who had regained some of her energy in the cool night air, sitting on the curb by the diner.

"How much they like each other," said El, her voice still a little sleepy.

"You know, I don't think I like that at all," said Mike. "I think that's weird."

El snuggled into his arm. "Hopper thinks *we're* weird."

"Well, that's different! Like, completely different."

"Not really," said El.

Mike shook his head. "Well I can imagine Will doesn't even want to think about that." He paused. "El, what happened in there?" They hadn't really talked about it since they had been reunited. First, they had both been too happy to see each other. Then, El had been so tired that bringing it up just would have felt wrong to him. But his curiosity was getting the better of him. And his worries, too.

"I saw something. It was the voice I keep hearing. It took us out of the Upside Down, Mike. It took us somewhere else."

"Like another world?" Mike asked, his eyes wide. "Is that even possible?"

"It said it was in a prison and that it needed me to get out. And... and... it was horrible." El didn't know how else to describe the thing. The monstrous thing that had been so large it had taken up the entire world.

"What was it?" asked Mike. "What did it look like? Did you get to see it?" His mind was racing. They needed to talk to the rest of the party.

"It was the biggest thing I've ever seen," said El. "It was the size of the whole world. Tentacles. Eyes... everywhere." She shuddered.

Mike shook his head. "I can't believe it. I thought we'd seen the worst of it."

"It took me somewhere else," said El. "I wasn't in the Upside Down anymore."

"You must have been so scared," said Mike. "You're amazing, you know that?"

"I was scared. Scared I wouldn't see you again. Scared I'd fail Hopper again."

Mike hugged her close. "You never failed anyone. You always did everything you could."

El lowered her head into her knees. "I don't want this to happen anymore."

"We're going to stop it," said Mike. "We're going to make sure nothing like this ever happens again."

He said these words with confidence, but El wasn't so sure. Mike hadn't seen the size of the creature. He hadn't heard those terrible words in his head. Mike hadn't needed to run from animated corpses that begged for death. She trusted him and she loved him, but he didn't know what it was like. Not really.

...

The next day, the party got together to brainstorm about what was happening in the Upside Down. El shared as many details as she could, as the gang sat around her and listened with expressions of fear and fascination.

"It said it was a prison?" asked Dustin.

"Yes," said El. "And it wanted to connect the worlds."

Lucas was deep in thought. "It doesn't make sense," he said. "Another

world? How is that even possible? And how is it connected to the Upside Down?"

"It's not the Upside Down," said Max. "It's something else. It might not even be a place."

"And the eyes," said Mike. "Don't forget the eyes. It sounds like this is what's been opening all the portals. It's watching us. And it wants El."

They were back in the Wheeler basement and each of the party felt like they were at the end of their rope. Every enemy they had faced so far had seemed to follow some set of rules, something that made them understandable, even if they were alien. This was different. This was bigger than a demogorgon. It was even bigger than the Mind Flayer, which until now had seemed like the worst thing they could possibly face.

Will was looking thoughtful, and hadn't said anything throughout the entirety of El's story. Now, he stood up and started looking through the piles of books that lined the corners of the room, books that Mike had either read or discarded or decided that he didn't want to go through yet.

"What are you doing?" asked Lucas.

"I have an idea," said Will. "The whole time El was telling her story, I started to remember something. I don't know if I'm right, but you guys were right about the Upside Down and the demogorgon, so I think I might be onto something here."

"Yeah," said Lucas. "But what are you looking for?"

"I can't remember what it was called," said Will. "But I'll know it when I see it."

It didn't take him long to find it. After a few more minutes of searching, he pulled out a massive tome, a weighty hardcover that looked like it was bound leather. There was a cloth bookmark hanging out from the bottom of the book.

"What is *that*?" asked Max, wrinkling her nose.

"I know it doesn't look too pretty, but don't be fooled. It's got all kinds of crazy stories in here."

"I don't even think I've seen that before," said Mike.

"You have," said Will. "But it was a long time ago. I think some teacher told you that the author wrote horror and you got really into it... until you started reading it and found out that it was way too long and boring."

"That doesn't sound like me," said Mike.

El giggled. "Yes it does."

"So what?" said Lucas. "What does it have to do with anything?"

Will opened up the book. It *did* look long and boring, but on some of the pages, there were illustrations. Black and white illustrations that looked like ink drawings. There were monstrous creatures depicted on the pages, gigantic beings that looked like something out of a nightmare.

"Elder gods," he said. "Beings that existed long before humanity and disappeared for unknown reasons. They're so alien and so utterly different that we can't even look at them and retain our sanity."

"El's still sane," said Dustin. "And I assume Hopper is too. Though it can be hard to tell."

"Sure," said Will. "Maybe some of the stories were exaggerated. But it adds up, doesn't it?"

Mike stood up and started pacing. "It was locked away, right?"

El nodded. That was what it sounded like.

"And now it wants out. But it needs you to break the barrier. I mean... how is that even possible? It's not like you're going to walk back in there on your own. If Hopper was the bait, how does it plan on getting you back in?" Mike's mind was racing.

"Maybe it doesn't," said Max. "Maybe it has another way of bringing

her back. Something in this world."

"It can't do that, can it?" asked Dustin. "Just reach over here and grab one of us?"

"Well it can't just be that easy or El wouldn't be sitting here with us, mouthbreather!" said Max. "But it might have other ways, too. We don't exactly have a manual on this sort of thing. Just that... telephone book."

"What are we supposed to do?" asked Lucas. "It's a god. Or something like that. I mean, we took down the Mind Flayer, but that wasn't exactly a god, was it? It was just a... meat puppet. It wasn't even really the Mind Flayer."

"We just need to be careful," said Mike. "If we see a portal, stay away from it. As long as El doesn't cross back over, we're fine, right?"

It sounded nice in theory, but even Mike didn't truly believe it. That was a temporary solution at best. Who knew if the situation wouldn't just keep getting worse until the portals remained permanent?

No one said everything. Everyone was thinking the same thing. There needed to be a better option.

"I can talk to it," said El finally. "I can find it in my head. It tries to talk to me every night."

"...that's only moderately horrifying," said Lucas. "Do you think it's safe?"

"No," said El.

Of course it wasn't safe. The problem was that none of them could come up with a better plan for defeating what appeared to be an actual god. The watcher with one million eyes, as it had referred to itself when speaking to El.

"Maybe we can just... be normal for a little?" asked Mike.

"What's normal?" asked El.

Mike opened his mouth to explain, then saw that El had a mischievous smile on her face and he realized that she was messing with him. "Nothing you would ever know," he said with a grin.

"Yeah, we're a bunch of freaks!" said Dustin.

"No," said Max. "That's just you. Oh, and Mike, you coming to school tomorrow? Because I don't think your mother is going to buy the whole 'she's sick' thing again. And she seemed pretty mad at you after you just ran off last night."

Mike's shoulders sagged. It had been a crazy couple of days, but Max was right. Reality was still there, whether he was interested in it or not. "We should just be given degrees at this point for all the times we saved this stupid town," he grumbled.

El laughed. "I'll sleep in."

"You won't be able to get away with that forever!" said Mike.

El shrugged. "For long enough."

Lucas pulled out a movie—*Star Wars*, which they still hadn't grown tired of. No one complained. It was the safest choice. And Lucas was not about to let El pick the movie after what happened last time.

For the rest of the night, they were able to pretend they were just normal kids, watching the story of a group of heroes in a galaxy far away, a long time ago.

...

"My cabin is literally destroyed," said Hopper. "Jesus. I thought you were exaggerating. How did the town not condemn it? This is a goddamn mess!"

Joyce, El, and Hopper were staring at the Mind-Flayer-trashed cabin. Will and Jonathan were spending the day together, and the rest of the party was, unfortunately for them, at school.

"I think there was talk of turning it into a monument," said Joyce. "You died a hero, you know."

Hopper groaned. "How the hell am I supposed to just show up and say, 'Guess what? I didn't die! I'm actually fine!' I mean, come on. They're going to turn me into the story of the century. I don't want that! I just want my cabin back."

"The cabin was okay," said El. Her tone indicated that the word 'okay' was not what she would use to describe the cabin.

"Hey, the cabin was home!" said Hopper. "Though... I guess with all the time you spent in there, I can understand why you might want to move on. Maybe it's time for me to do that too."

El reached out to hold her father's hand. He looked surprised at first. It was not something he was used to, and his time in the Upside Down had not increased his emotional intelligence. But after a moment, he relaxed and let it happen. He was back. It was time he started acting like he was back.

"We're going to have to go to the press," Joyce said. "Eventually. You can't be a corpse forever."

"Why not?" asked Hopper. "It suits me."

"Because people are going to wonder why you're sitting at Enzo's with the recently returned Joyce Byers."

"Uh. Yeah, I guess that makes sense. But I mean, what are we going to say to them?" Hopper did not relish the prospect of having to explain where he had been for months, particularly when the truth was so outrageous that he would never be able to come close to using it.

"We'll work that out. Maybe you were in a coma from the fire. Maybe you were being debriefed by the government. The Hawkins Lab people might even help us out on that one. For right now though, why don't we take a look inside? See what we can bring out with us?"

The trio walked through the front door, Hopper feeling quite apprehensive at what he might find on the inside. He wasn't that attached to material things, but it was still the place he had lived with El for so long, the place where he had taught her to survive on

her own the best that he could. He had memories there, even if he wasn't likely to admit that.

The inside of the cabin was torn apart, as he had expected. His things were strewn about the room and there were hastily covered holes in the ceiling and on some of the walls. Plastic tarp covered most of them, while on others there were simple planks nailed to the wall.

"Jesus," said Hopper. "Really did a number on it, didn't it?"

"If you don't want to be here—"

"No," said Hopper, "it's probably for the best. Let's get to it."

They spent the next few hours sorting through what remained of Hopper's possessions, which admittedly, wasn't much. He had never owned all that much to begin with, and after the cabin was trashed, the amount of earthly goods he owned was even lower. It was obvious to El that Hopper's heart wasn't in the search. He didn't really care whether they found everything or even the majority of everything. That was because before he had even begun to look for anything else, he had pulled out a cardboard box from a crawlspace in the cabin. The box was labeled 'Sara' and it appeared to contain a large number of mementos from the past.

"Got everything I need right here," he said, his tone a joking one. But El could tell that he had meant what he said. She understood.

...

That night, Joyce picked Hopper up, because even with all of his jokes about getting her, he didn't have a car currently, due to it being put in storage after he went missing. It didn't matter. The very fact that they were finally going to be there together was enough for both of them.

Hopper knew it would have made sense for him to feel nervous, but he didn't. All he felt was happiness. Happiness at being back, at being alive. Happy to have El back. Happy that this thing that had seemed so impossible was now happening.

"I'm actually glad it's been a while," said Hopper as they walked in

and were seated. Normally they would have needed reservations far in advance, but with it being a Wednesday night, the establishment was not too crowded.

"Why's that?" asked Joyce. Hopper thought she looked fantastic, and he had been sure to tell her. She had looked surprised that he had noticed, which had made him feel uncharacteristically sad. He had a lot of work to do on himself.

"Last time I was here may not have gone so well," he said. "Probably for the best they don't remember me."

Joyce cringed. "Do I want to know?"

"You can imagine, I'm sure," said Hopper. "My typical assertive self. For some reason, it doesn't always go over well with everyone."

Joyce rolled her eyes. "Yes, it really is hard to believe."

"Hey, you *did* stand me up. For an actual nerd."

"He helped us figure out what was going on with Starcourt!"

"Sure," said Hopper, grinning as he glanced at the menu. "And that worked out great. How do I know that wasn't all just part of your plan to get rid of me?"

"Well, I am sitting with you now."

"Yeah," said Hopper. "I guess you are."

After they had ordered, Hopper began to feel more and more like everything was working out just the way it was supposed to. He had worried things would have been strange, with him being gone so long and with the unusual trajectory their relationship had taken, but none of that was true.

"Being dead has its perks," he said. "No one can interrupt me for a disturbance call tonight."

"When are you going to make yourself un-dead?" asked Joyce, who then winced at the wording of her question. "Or... you know what I

mean."

"Eventually," said Hopper. "I just want a little time. I know I'm going to get called in by the Hawkins lab people and they're going to want to interview me. I'd like to avoid that for a few days."

"I think we can make that work," said Joyce. "What are you going to tell them?"

Hopper closed his eyes and thought for a moment. "Still working that out. I don't want them to know how El was involved. I'll tell them as much as I can without bringing her into it. That shouldn't be an issue. They know just as much as we do at this point, so I'm not worried. Worst case, they'll be an annoyance. Best case, they'll leave me alone entirely."

"What about the town?" asked Joyce. "They're going to have questions."

"That's a little harder. I was thinking coma, maybe. Intensive medical observation. The Department of Energy people might be able to help out with that one. Thing is, people trust me. They're not going to question it too much."

Joyce smiled. "You sound almost disappointed."

"Trust is how all these problems happened. We trusted the government to not do things like this and look where we are now."

Joyce looked around the room. "Seems like we're right where we're supposed to be."

Hopper almost rolled his eyes—almost. Instead, he restrained himself and nodded. "You know what? I think we are. I did a lot of thinking while I was over there, more than I've done in a while. I've seen some things—as a cop, as a soldier, as a human. But nothing like that. And I started wondering if it was all worth it, if our world is worth all the craziness. You know what I realized?"

"What?" asked Joyce.

"I realized that it wasn't even a question. I thought about El, I thought

you. I thought about those kids. I thought about every stupid, annoying interaction I had ever had with someone who was making me want to strangle them. And I decided it was worth it."

Joyce was looking at him strangely.

"What?"

"Jim Hopper, you are constantly full of surprises," she said.

He was fortunately spared from having to respond because at that moment, the waiter appeared next to their table, ready to take their orders. Hopper breathed a sigh of relief. There was only so much heart to heart that he could take in one sitting.

...

Strangely, life went on. It felt like the apocalypse was hanging over them, but nothing happened. They went about their regular lives as the days slipped by. El was spending more and more time with Hopper, trying to help him get reacquainted with the world, and hoping that she would be able to live with him fulltime again. It wasn't that she didn't like living with the Byers family. She loved them dearly and was so grateful for them. Hopper just felt like he understood her, all of her. Hopper had a darkness in him too, the same way El did. It didn't make them bad people... it just made them who they were.

Sometimes El wondered if Mike would be okay with her dark side. He knew about most of the bad things she had done in the past, but he was just so *good*. She worried that she wasn't good enough to be with him, even though he constantly was reassuring her that there couldn't be a more ridiculous idea than that.

In addition, she was starting to think about going to school with him. Once Hopper publicly made his return known—which would be soon, as he had already contacted the authorities, who were in the process of debriefing him—she hoped that he could formally adopt her. After that, it seemed only natural to her that she would start attending school with the rest of the party. The idea excited her. She thought about shopping for school clothes with Max, about passing notes in

class, and, yes, even about learning something, though that was far from the first thing on her mind.

Another thing that was on her mind was the fact that Christmas was fast approaching. She was so happy that she'd be able to spend it with Mike and the rest of the party—hopefully the first of many more to come. The weather was getting colder and colder, and though it hadn't snowed yet, she had a feeling it was on the way.

"What the hell are you listening to?" Hopper asked as he came into the hotel room he was staying at, under a fake name. It was the same hotel that the Byers were currently at and so El had taken to sneaking into Hopper's room and hanging out there during the day. It felt like old times, only this time she wasn't forced to hide, it was all by choice.

"Bowie," she said, without looking up from the book she was reading. It was the same book that Will had pulled out in Mike's basement. She thought that if she couldn't be in school, she could at least do her best to help their cause.

"You're listening to Bowie now? Jonathan got to you, didn't he? See, this is what happens when I'm not around," Hopper huffed, before sitting down heavily in one of the chairs in the room and turning the tv on. "Kidding. You like whatever you want and don't ever let *anyone* tell you differently, go it?"

"Even boys?" asked El, mischievously.

"In that case," said Hopper, "maybe let me tell you differently."

El smiled to herself. Hopper didn't fool her anymore. Something had changed for him, even before he had gone missing. Maybe he had seen that Mike wasn't so bad, or maybe he had decided to let El make her own decisions. She knew Hopper was always going to be a little overprotective—it was just how he was—but she could live with that. It meant that he cared and it meant that he was doing his best to show how much he cared.

"So kid, there's something I need to talk to you about," said Hopper, who had muted the tv. He looked almost embarrassed, and El

wondered what that could possibly mean.

She closed the book, which she had to admit was pretty good, in a strange, old sort of way, and looked at Hopper.

"I'm going to be talking to the press in a few days," said Hopper. "Telling the town I'm still alive. And I had an idea. I talked to Joyce about it already, and she said it was okay with her. The real person I need to talk to about it is you."

El didn't understand what Hopper was trying to say. It sounded like he was trying to use far too many words to describe something very simple, which was out of character for him. He was usually a man of few words and blunt honesty.

"What is it?" she asked.

"When I tell the press that I'm back, I wanted to know if you would like me to tell them that I adopted you. That I found you in the wreckage and that no one can find out where you're from. It's not like they'd be able to prove me wrong."

"What about the Russians?" asked El. She knew they weren't likely to come after her again following her display of powers, but it was still a valid concern.

"I was thinking about that," said Hopper. "And I think being aggressive might keep you safer. They won't go after the recently adopted orphan of the chief of police, right? Before, no one knew who you were because we were trying to keep you safe from our people, their people, from everyone. Now we have the perfect excuse—you had amnesia and I pulled you out of the fire."

"Maybe I pulled *you* out of the fire," said El, teasingly.

"Maybe we both pulled each other out," said Hopper with a huff. "But... my question stands. What do you think?"

El's heart swelled with happiness in her chest. She had been hoping for this exact outcome but had not known how to ask about it. She didn't want to be a bother, nor had she wanted to seem rude to the Byers.

"I would love it," said El. "Dad."

Hopper looked at her with what might have been tears in his eyes. "It's time for a fresh start, kid. Me and you."

She thought for a moment. "Can I go to school?"

Hopper shook his head in disbelief. "You have to be the first kid in the history of the world to ask if she could go to school. I don't know if I should be proud or disappointed. At least we know you're not picking up on my bad habits."

"Damn right," said El.

Hopper coughed. "At least, not all of my bad habits."

...

After that conversation, the process moved quickly. Hopper was called out of town for a few days to debrief with the Department of Energy, but as promised, El was never even brought up during those conversations. When he returned, he made two stops. The first was to Joyce, to let her know what was about to happen. The second was to the Hawkins Police Department, where he officially announced his return to the world of the living. A press conference was promptly scheduled.

Hopper, strangely, didn't feel nervous. This was part of the job that he typically could not stand. This time, though, he was barely even thinking about it. There were so many other things on his mind—finalizing his adoption of El, furthering his relationship with Joyce, returning to the world, and most importantly, keeping the town safe.

In the past years, many people had made a misconception about Hopper. They had assumed that his apathy was due to laziness or a lack of caring towards his position. The truth was more complicated. He had grown tired of a town in which nothing happened. A town in which he was useless in every sense of the world. It wore on him as year after year went by where he was little more than a prop in a uniform.

That all changed, of course, with the disappearance of Will Byers. He

remembered the exact moment that he knew the town would be changed forever—when the bike had been pulled out of the lake. He remembered the feeling—the rush of terror that had filled him, followed by the resolve to make sure that no child was ever lost from Hawkins.

After everything he had faced, what was a little press conference?

"They're ready for you, Chief," said his deputy.

"Thanks for the warning," he muttered, standing up from the seat where he was reviewing his notes one last time. "Let's get this show started."

He knew El and Joyce would be in the audience. That was enough for him.

"Hello, Hawkins," he said into the microphone, trying to ignore the flash of cameras and the whispering that was circling through the crowd. "It's good to be home."

...

The prison world was beginning to feel smaller and smaller. The watcher with one million eyes did not feel human emotions like frustration, but it imagined that if it did, now would be the time. The portals were opening at a faster and faster rate and in more precise locations. Soon, they would be opening only where they could not be seen, and no one would have any idea. By the time the girl figured out what was happening, it would be too late.

The watcher replayed long-faded memories of the outside world, of what had once been. The beauty of the natural world was soon at hand.

The servant of the watcher, the American, was drawing near to his prey. The girl could hardly win a fight of that sort.

All of these were thoughts that the watcher might have had, if only it had been capable of such human things. Instead, it existed, in all its alien power, conscious of everything all at once, neither patient nor impatient, silent in its knowledge that soon, hell would descend onto

earth.

8. Chapter 8: The Investigation

(A/N: Thank you so much to anyone who has taken the time to follow, favorite, read, or review. I'm going to do my best to stick to my current release schedule but since work has started for me again (I'm a teacher), it might slow down a little.)

The concept of insurance was baffling to El. Granted, no one had gone out of their way to explain it to her, but from what she could understand, someone had given Hopper a ton of money because something had damaged his cabin. She didn't see how anyone got anything out of that deal except for Hopper.

Her confusion aside, it meant that Hopper now had enough money to find them a new house. It wasn't going to be anything huge, he had warned her, but she didn't care. She was just thrilled to be with him again. And she swore to do a better job of being a daughter, even when it meant he was telling her things that she didn't really want to hear.

"What do you think, kid? It's not much, but it was the best I could do on short notice. I bet you were getting tired of living in that hotel."

She hadn't been; she had thought it was fun. But she still thought the house Hopper had found was quite nice. It was on the outskirts of town, just the way he liked, so that he wouldn't have to deal with people all the time. It was small, certainly, probably only the size of the cabin at most. But it felt like home already.

"Home," she said with a big smile.

"That's right. Home."

El had been officially introduced to the town as Jane Eleanor "El" Hopper. According to the official report, no one had known who her parents were and she had suffered amnesia after a traumatic brain injury from the fire at Starcourt—which was how Hopper had been in a coma. He had reportedly risked his life to get her out, but collapsed at the entrance, only to be pulled out and put under observation.

There were some people who were asking questions—for example, why had no one told the town that Hopper was alive? But by and large, most people were just happy to see that their chief was back. No one asked too many questions about El, either. Everyone assumed she was an orphan, based on the way Hopper described her situation and what had happened at Starcourt. No one wanted to be the person to ask, "Hey are her parents *really* dead?"

"Moving truck is gonna be here soon," said Hopper. "Bringing as much stuff as I could salvage from the cabin. It won't be a lot so our place is going to be a little bare for a while."

He said that, but El knew the real meaning of the word bare, and this didn't bother her at all.

"I looked into getting you enrolled in the school," said Hopper. "Since you seemed so sure about it. It's going to be... tough, you know that, right? Kids are mean. Even more so when you're different."

"I'm... different," said El, frowning a little. She knew that already of course, but hadn't really thought about what it would be like to join school and have the other kids not accept her. Maybe she should have, seeing as how she knew all about the mouthbreathers firsthand.

"Yeah, you are," said Hopper. "But so am I. So is Mike. So is Joyce. And Will. And Jonathon. Hell, anyone worth knowing is different. You like Bowie, right? He's probably the strangest person on the planet right now and people *love* him. There is nothing wrong with being different, so don't ever let anyone tell you otherwise. If the whole world was filled with people like you, it would be a lot quieter and a lot more peaceful, and I think that's something you should be proud of."

"I am proud," said El, but it sounded more like a question than a statement.

"You can do better than that," said Hopper.

"I am proud!" El said again, her voice stronger this time.

"I'm proud too," said Hopper. "I can't wait to see what you do."

...

Hopper went back to work the day after. The other police and staff at the station asked if he was certain he wanted to come back so soon, but he couldn't see any reason not to. Yes, he was weaker from his ordeal in the Upside Down, and yes, he had lost quite a bit of weight. But the Department of Energy people had assured him that aside from that, he would make a full recovery. For that, he thanked the gas mask he had found and his military training.

He wanted to be doing something, even if in a town like Hawkins, that didn't mean taking care of conventional crime. What he really wanted was a way to keep track of what was going on in town, in case that... *thing* started to make its way across. And he wanted to show El that you didn't have to let something terrible like that take over your entire life. He never thought he would be worrying about being a role model for a kid, but here he was...

Living with El had meant a couple of things for him. He had needed to clean up his act. He had needed to stop drinking so damn much. He had needed to think about someone else beyond himself. At first, it had been a daunting task. Then, bit by bit, he found that it started to come naturally, that he felt like this was the way it was supposed to be.

If only I had found her earlier, he had thought to himself many times.

The paperwork for getting her to school could have taken a bit, as most red tape usually did. But he was Jim Hopper, and he didn't take no for answer. It wouldn't take long and soon she'd be riding the bus in and sitting with her friends. Hopper was momentarily grateful for Mike's existence. Yes, he wasn't necessarily the biggest fan of the relationship. But Hopper knew that Mike would be good for El in school. Of course she could take care of herself, but having some friendly faces would be good.

Hopper entered the station in his uniform, feeling like he had gotten his good night's sleep in months. Probably because he actually had.

"Hey, Flo," he said on his way in.

The police secretary looked at him with surprise. "You're here."

"Of course I'm here, I said I'd be here, didn't I?"

"Yeah, but..."

"Nice to see you too," he said, rolling his eyes. This was what he didn't want—everyone treating him like he could fall apart at any second. He was Jim Hopper! He'd gone through worse than this!

...Okay, maybe that wasn't strictly true. This was by far the worst thing he had gone through. But that didn't mean he couldn't handle it.

"Chief, we got an issue." He was barely through the front door when Callahan approached him.

"How the hell...? Is it a real issue or is it just a Hawkins issue? Because it is too early for a Hawkins issue and I think we filled our quota of real issues for a few years."

"It's a real issue. You're going to want to hear this."

Dammit. The town wasn't ready for something else. Not when they had impending doom already looming over them.

"What is it?"

Callahan followed Hopper to the chief's office. "We got a call this morning from a citizen who found a house."

"And this is worthy of our attention why?"

"Because the house shouldn't have been there. There's no record of it and it seems like it was built recently. But that's not all. The real problem was what was on the inside of the house. Or... who was on the inside of the house."

Hopper was putting the pieces together. "Russian soldiers. Did they kill anyone?"

"What? How did you—?"

"The Mayor was dirty. Anything that got built without records must have been done with his approval. If he was working for the Russians, then the only people that could be in that house would be Russians."

"Well, they didn't kill anyone. I mean, maybe they did, but not recently. Because they've been dead for a couple of days. And by the looks of things, they were killed by someone or something that had a major issue with them. I'm talking torn apart, Chief."

Hopper had a couple ideas in his head of things that could tear a human being apart, but none of them should be in the real world right now. "We better go take a look at this."

"Powell is on the scene already. We wanted to keep this under wraps as much as possible."

"Smart man," said Hopper, grabbing his hat off the wall. "Let's go take a look at some dead Russians."

...

The "house" wasn't much of a house at all. It was closer to a shack and it was located in the middle of the woods. Hopper had told Flo to double-check building permits. It was possible the house was on the record and had just been missed the first time. She reported back not too long after though, stating that there was definitely nothing on the books.

Hopper hadn't expected anything other than that, but he knew he needed to do his due diligence. There was minimal police presence on the scene, just Powell, who was waiting outside as Hopper and Callahan approached.

"Hey, Chief," Powell said. "Helluva first day back, huh?"

"I'd say I was surprised but I mean, this is Hawkins. This place hasn't been normal in a while."

"How you feeling, Chief?" Powell asked as they turned to the house.

"Tired," said Hopper. "What else is new? All things considered, I could

feel a whole lot worse right now."

"You're going to want to brace yourself for this one," said Powell. "We ain't seen something like this in a long time. Maybe ever."

Hopper, who had seen plenty in the past few months, said nothing. He imagined that whatever he was about to find would be disturbing, sure. Could it be any worse than the Upside Down? Or God forbid, that thing with the eyes? No way. Nothing could even come close.

Powell ushered them inside and Hopper's breath hitched. The inside of the shack was a mess, in more ways than one. First, the interior was utterly trashed. Furniture shredded, the walls riddled with bullet holes, every surface covered in dents and holes, looking like a massive brawl had occurred inside.

The real mess, though, came from the blood.

There was blood everywhere, even in places Hopper didn't think it was possible to get blood. The floor, the walls, the ceiling. Crimson red gore had dried on all of these surfaces, telling Hopper that whatever had happened, had happened a few days ago.

"Jesus," he said, examining the trajectory that things had occurred at. Arterial spray could account for some of the mess, but even that didn't make sense. "Are there any bodies?"

Powell pointed without saying anything at a mess of ruined furniture in the middle of the room. It looked almost like a trashed table or—

No. That wasn't a table. Those *were* the bodies, torn apart and stacked in some sick imitation of a sculpture.

Hopper's brain went into overdrive. The thing that so many people forgot about him was that before he came to Hawkins as the chief, he was a detective. And he was a damn good one. He had the mind of a detective and a brain that was geared towards problem solving. When something like this happened, his first step was always to shut off any part of his mind that was leaning towards emotion and begin examining the facts. So many people didn't know this about him or just forgot that he was capable of it. In many cases, he could use this

to his advantage. People underestimated him, and it had come in handy many times during his tenure as a detective.

Just because I'm big doesn't mean I'm stupid, he thought to himself as he examined the carnage.

The facts were all screaming one thing at him—no human could have done this. He of course was not a forensics expert, but he had seen enough murder scenes to know that this was something else. And given his recent experiences, he could assume he knew just what was behind it.

The portals must be letting something through. Those corpse things, maybe? But if so, where are they?

He needed to talk to El. More importantly, the press couldn't get ahold of this.

"We need to keep this quiet," he said, without looking at his deputies, both of whom were trying to avoid being sick looking at the mess in front of them. "This has happened before or will happen again. Probably both. I need the two of you to start putting any suspicious person reports on my desk. Do not let anyone know. And I mean *anyone*. Trust no one."

"Because of the Russians?"

"Russians?" Powell asked. "How'd he know they were Russian? You ain't even seen them yet."

Hopper shook his head. "I'm serious. Talk to the person who found this and impress upon them just how important an investigation this is. We can't let this get out or it'll be a nightmare."

"Yeah," said Callahan, looking at Powell with a raised eyebrow. "I guess it might be. We can't just leave this here though. Right?"

Hopper shook his head. "I'm going to get some people on it. You just keep me updated."

He stalked out of the shack. He had seen more than enough. The Department of Energy was about to get a very angry phone call and

they would be damn well cleaning up this mess, since it was their mess in the first place.

If only I could get my hands on that Brenner guy, Hopper thought darkly. I'd wring his goddamn neck.

It was a pity Brenner had died so quickly. The bastard had deserved far worse.

...

"You're going to get to go to school with us?" asked Mike, disbelievingly. "What? How?"

"Hopper is my dad now," El said beaming. She laughed, threw her arms around Mike, and kissed him. "Hawkins is home!"

Mike was stunned. Thrilled, yes, but also stunned. He had never dreamed...

"That's amazing!" Max said, hugging El after El had separated from Mike. "You're going to love it! I mean, you'll hate it too, but that's school I guess, right?"

"What about you?" Lucas asked, looking at Will. "You going to come back to Hawkins?"

Will kicked a rock on the ground. The party was walking to the gorge to spend the evening there. It was starting to get cold during the day and they wanted to maximize their time outside as much as possible before winter hit. Yeah, playing in the snow was great, but it could restrict your freedom.

"I don't know," Will said. "I think my mom might want to stay away from here."

"Yeah, but what about her and Hopper?" asked Mike, who immediately clapped his hand to his mouth for speaking without thinking. "Shit. Sorry."

The party stared at Will with wide eyes and mouths. "Your mom and Hopper?" asked Max. "That is... wow. Just so gross. I am so sorry."

El frowned. "What's wrong with that?"

Max tried to explain. "It's just like... I mean, it's Hopper! And his mom! Actually, it's hard to explain. Sorry."

El was confused. "I like Hopper."

"I like Hopper too," said Max. "Uh, it's just weird to see your parent dating someone like that, you know? I mean, Hopper is pretty okay. Until he starts yelling. But he's a cop, you know?"

"No," said El.

Max sighed. "I give up. You'll understand one day."

El doubted that she would understand. Yes, Hopper liked to yell, but he was still a pretty cool guy. El supposed that maybe she was a little biased since Hopper was her dad now. Some things about the world still didn't make much sense to her.

"Anyway, I don't really know," said Will. "I think part of her wants to forget what happened here. I kind of want to forget. But I don't want to leave you guys behind."

"Maybe that's life," said Mike. "Remembering the good and the bad. There's been a lot of both."

Dustin patted Will on the back. "We're your buddies no matter what, you know that, right? Doesn't matter if you're down the street or across the country."

"Thanks," said Will. "I feel the same way about you guys, too."

At the gorge, the party took up their usual positions, some sitting, some standing, some chucking rocks down below. They were trying to avoid the big question—what to do about El's visions and experiences.

Finally, Dustin broke the silence. "Guys, I hate to be the one to do this, but it's been long enough. We gotta do something about this, right? I mean, all this waiting is killing me."

Lucas let out a huge sigh. "I mean, yeah, but what are we supposed to do? It's basically an elder god. That means it's older than this entire planet! We're a bunch of teenagers. Granted, one of us is a teenager who happens to be a nuke, but we're still just kids."

Mike looked up. He was holding El's hand while she enjoyed the view. "Yeah, we're teenagers. But we're not just any teenagers. We've survived things most adults couldn't even imagine."

"Adults can't imagine anything," said Max under her breath. "That's why they're adults."

"It can't die," said El, interrupting everyone. The party collectively turned to look at her. "Has to be locked away. It's in a prison right now."

"How do you know that?" asked Lucas.

"Books," said El.

"El, I don't know if old books are the best place to get your info from..." said Lucas.

"What, and D&D manuals are?" said Mike. "Give her a break, it's all we have right now."

"Let's say it's true," said Dustin. "Then what? If we can't kill it, what are we supposed to do?"

"We just have to lock it away," said Mike. "But make sure that this time, it can't go anywhere. For real."

Lucas shook his head. "That's not a plan. That's how you die. Or get mind-flayed. Who *knows* what this thing can do?"

"I closed the portal before," said El.

"And look at where that got you," said Lucas. "It almost killed you. I want this thing gone as much as everyone else does, but I don't want you to have to die for it."

El felt a wave of gratitude wash over her. Lucas wasn't arguing with

her because he thought she was wrong, he was arguing because he didn't want anything to happen to her. Her bond with the party had grown so much deeper than she had ever expected and it always brought a smile to her face.

"I'm scared too," she said. "But we need to protect everyone."

Mike squeezed her hand. "We'll all protect each other."

"Has anyone seen anything new anyway?" asked Dustin. "I haven't seen a portal since that first time. Do you think it's stopped?"

"No," said El. "It's getting stronger."

"How do you know?" asked Max.

"I can feel it," said El, looking at Will, who could often feel similar things.

He shrugged. "I don't know. It's like my connection to the Upside Down was cut off after we sealed the Mind Flayer away. And anyway, it sounds like this thing isn't even in the Upside Down. It's somewhere beyond it, right?"

"In prison," El mused, thinking.

"What *is* the Upside Down, anyway?" asked Dustin. "Like, do we even really know? For all we know, it's tied to this other place somehow. Like a buffer, separating us from this watcher."

"I haven't seen anything else," said Mike, shivering at the thought of what had happened last time. "I don't want to see anything like that ever again."

Unfortunately, he had a feeling that before this was all over, he was going to see it again—and not only that, but he was going to see far worse than the portal that El had climbed into. Things were only going to escalate until they either stopped the portals from opening or they failed... and then who knew what might happen?

A general air of misery hung over the group of kids. None of them wanted to give into hopelessness—that seemed like such an adult

thing to do. It was just that right now, all they could see was how overwhelming the situation was.

Dustin threw a rock into the water below.

"You ever hear from Steve again?" asked Max. "Did he ever see anything else?"

Dustin shook his head. "No. Or if he did, he didn't say anything about it. I feel bad bringing him in on this though. I mean, he's got enough problems of his own to deal with."

Max wrinkled her nose. "Him? Problems? Like what?"

Dustin waved a finger in the air disapprovingly. "Uh, no, I can't violate the bro code like that. If he wants you to know about it, he'll tell you."

Max threw her hands in the air. "Secrets, secrets, always! I was just asking. And besides, I'm your bro, too!"

"No, it's not like that, it just means—"

"Guys," said El, trying to get their attention. As usual, her voice was too soft to break through the argument.

"It means what? It means I'm a *girl* and so I'm not part of your secret club!"

"Max, you're my friend too, I just don't think Steve—"

"Guys..."

"What, is Steve your boyfriend now? Do I need to tell Suzie she's got some competition?"

"*Guys!*"

That got their attention. The entire party turned to the usually mild-mannered El, to see that she had gotten up, walked past the arguing Dustin and Max, and was staring over the edge of the cliff at the water below. Mike was standing next to the rock they had been

sitting on, looking concerned.

"What is it?" asked Lucas, his voice wavering with apprehension.

"Down here," said El, pointing off the cliff. "Do you see that?"

The rest of the party approached El, staring over her shoulder. Mike felt his breath hitch and his heart pounded in his ears. Over the edge, down near the water, there was something shimmering. Something massive that covered at least a football field's worth of space. Mike had seen pictures of the Northern Lights. This looked almost like that. The only difference was that the Northern Lights were beautiful. This was wrong. It was like an oil slick, something that could be beautiful if you didn't know how unnatural and harmful it was.

"What is it?" asked Will finally.

"Gateway," whispered El. "Opening up."

No one asked how she knew or if she was sure. Her tone of voice left no room for argument.

"Oh Christ," said Dustin. "Are we too late?"

El shook her head. "Not yet."

The shimmer grew more and more visible until it almost seemed to take on a physical form. Then it vanished from the inside out, a small hole forming in the middle and spreading to the edges until nothing was left but a clear view of the water below.

A clear view that was soon replaced by a perfectly visible, fully formed, colossal eyeball.

Dustin screamed and stumbled backwards. Mike involuntarily clutched for El's hand. Lucas grabbed Max's hand. Max barely flinched. Will's hand found the back of his neck, and he was not surprised to feel his hair rising. Perhaps the connection had not been as severed as much as he had thought it was.

Children.

The voice echoed in all their heads, sounding like metal being twisted hopelessly out of shape. Will clutched at his head, groaning in agony.

Nothing but children. To think something as pathetic as human spawn could do so much to hurt my essence.

Images flashed into their heads along with the words. The demogorgon, the demodogs.

"Your... essence?" said El, squeezing Mike's hand.

I have been preparing for my freedom for a very long time, whelp. What you have already seen was nothing. Barely a precursor. You know nothing.

The final word rang in their heads like an echoing scream.

"You won't win," said El.

Don't you understand? I already have.

The eye blinked, but instead of opening back up, it simply vanished. The party stood there in silence; the only sound that could be heard was the distant water below them and the wind.

Dustin let out a rush of breath. "Guys," he said. "I thought we were going to die."

"It can't hurt us," said El. "Not yet."

"Not yet," said Lucas. "But soon! And it said it already won! What does that mean?"

"Nothing," said El, turning her back on the gorge. "It won't win."

It can't.

...

The rest of the week went by in a blur. Mike couldn't concentrate on anything. All he could think about was the size of the eyeball that had manifested above the water and the sound of the terrible voice.

School meant little right now. Who could possibly care about high school when they were facing the inevitable end of the world as they knew it?

El hadn't started yet. Hopper had said most likely early next week, but he had been acting weird too. He was gone a lot and wouldn't talk about it, El said. Mike wondered if Hopper was hiding something... but that didn't add up. Hopper was the type who would just tell it like it was.

The final bell rang and Mike made a beeline for the door, not caring who got in his way or who got pushed to the side. He needed to get out of here.

When he made it out of the building only a few minutes later, he was greeted by a surprise—El was standing there, waiting for him!

"What?" he said, so excited that he almost tripped on the way to her. "How did you get here?"

El grinned as she hugged him. "Hopper," she said, beaming. "He thought I could see the high school."

"Well, here it is," said Mike. "It kinda sucks, actually. Are you sure you really want to go to school? I mean, you've never been before. And high school can be... rough."

"I'm smart," said El. "I can do it."

"I know, I know, I just... worry."

El smiled. "Have to let me fight my own battles."

Mike laughed. "I think you're talking to Max too much. But yeah, you're right. Want to walk back?"

El took Mike's hand. "Come with me," she said, leading him away from the school. They weren't going in the direction of Mike's house though.

"Where are we going?" he asked.

"Secret," she insisted, tugging him onward. He smiled to himself and followed her. He didn't mind that quite a few of his peers were staring, no doubt wondering who the girl was that would be holding hands with someone as uncool as *Mike Wheeler*. That was one of the things he liked most about El. She didn't care about things like that. Part of it was because she didn't have any idea of social status and the other part was because all she cared about was loyalty and friendship.

They made it through most of the crowd and were walking side by side down the streets of Hawkins. There was something on Mike's mind that had been bothering him for a while.

"Can I ask you something?" he said to El.

She didn't respond, just turned to look at him, which he took as a sign to continue.

"Why do you like me?" he asked her. It seemed like a heavy question, like something he shouldn't even waste time thinking about, but it had been weighing on him. She was great looking, smart, and had literal super powers. She could have any guy she wanted, but she was with him. A skinny, awkward nerd who wasn't even always the best boyfriend. Sure, he had learned how to give her some space and how to let her make decisions for herself, but was that really enough?

El looked at him in astonishment. She stopped walk and let go of his hand. "Mike," she said, surprise in his voice. "I love you."

"Well... yeah," said Mike. "And I love you too. But I mean, do you ever think that maybe sometimes you're just with me because I was the first person you met after you got out of that place?"

El frowned. "No. You weren't, anyway. And maybe you could have been a jerk. Or a mouth-breather. Or a bad person. But you're not. You're you. I like *you*, Mike. Not someone else."

Mike sighed. "I guess. Sometimes I just wonder, you know? I'm just kinda... here. I'm weird and different and I mean..." He lifted his arm, indicating how skinny he was.

"Me too," she said. "Weird and different and here. But you're kind. And caring. And funny. And handsome." The word was new to her, but she knew it was a good fit for what she was trying to say about him.

"Thanks, El," said Mike. "Sorry. I guess sometimes I just need to hear that, you know? Being a teenager is hard. Are you *sure* you want to go to high school?"

"I can be with you," said El. "And Max. And Dustin. And Lucas. I can make friends. I want to be like everyone else." She paused. "I can't be outside forever."

When she put it like that, it made a lot of sense. Mike had been focused for a long time on protecting El and keeping her from the outside world. But now, things were changing. People knew she existed, and they were working on making her part of the world, just like everyone else. In a way, this was a huge victory for them.

"You can do anything," said Mike. "I just want you to be happy."

El took his hand again. "We can be happy together!"

They only had a bit further to go when El stopped in front of a building that Mike had never been inside before. It was an old ice cream shop—emphasis on the word old. Mike couldn't even make out the name of the shop, only that it did in fact serve ice cream.

"What's this?" he asked.

"C'mon," said El, grinning.

They entered together. Sure enough, on the inside it looked just as old. There wasn't quite a thin layer of dust covering everything, but it was close. It looked like it hadn't been popular in a few decades.

A bell above their head rang as they walked in, echoing in the empty shop. "How did you find this?" he asked El, confused. He didn't understand how she could have found something like this on your own.

She tugged at his hand, leading him up to the counter. The

shopkeeper was an elderly, kind-looking man who was smiling at them. "Just out of school?" the man said. "Maybe I can get your Friday evening off to a good start. What can I do for the two of you?"

"Two of your special," said El, beaming. "Please."

"Good choice," the man winked at them.

El reached into her pocket and pulled out money to pay for the ice cream. Mike's confusion grew even more. "How...? But...?"

El just smiled and led him to the counter by the window. Mike could have sworn that this place must have been new in 1950. "Do you like it here?" she said.

"It has... charm," Mike said. "I just don't understand. How did you find it? Where did you get the money from? What did you just order us? What's going on?"

"You'll see," said El, leaning her head on his shoulder. "I wanted to show you something new. You always show me new things. It's my turn."

The shopkeeper came out with his hands full. In each hand was something that looked a bit like a cross between a plate and bowl, and on each one was an ice cream sandwich made out of homemade waffles—not Eggos.

"They're real waffles!" said Mike, as the shopkeeper placed the plate-bowls in front of them.

El grinned. "Try it!"

Mike did. The waffle ice cream sandwich was fantastic, and as the old man had suggested, had greatly improved the start of his weekend. "How did you know about this?" Mike asked, his mouth full of waffle and ice cream. "Or is that a secret?"

El laughed. "No secret. Hopper took me here a few days ago. He said I should have a real waffle. He was right."

"You like them more than Eggos?" asked Mike, finding it hard to

believe.

El nodded.

"Wow," said Mike. "Hopper must have been happy to hear that!"

"It was really nice," she said. "He's different now."

Mike became a little more serious. "I think I'd be different too," he said. "He went through a lot. Do you think he's okay?"

El shrugged. "He's not good at asking for help. He's been busy."

"Did you tell him about the gorge?" asked Mike. "I feel like he'd want to know that."

El looked at her ice cream. "No. Didn't want to bother him."

"You've got to tell him," said Mike. "I know he's not my biggest fan and I know he's probably not happy that we're spending all this time together, but he has to know these things."

El looked up. "He told me to take you here."

Mike did a doubletake. "He did *what?*"

"He said I should take you somewhere nice. I asked him like where. He thought for a long time and told me this was the only nice place he knows."

Mike had to stop himself from laughing at Hopper's definition of the word nice—although he had to admit that the ice cream was great, and it was a neat place to be with El. He was about to make that comment when he heard a noise from the back of the shop. It was a clattering and clanging, like something had been knocked to the floor with great force.

El and Mike both looked in the direction of the sound but saw nothing beyond the counter. The noise must have been coming from further in the back.

"Hello?" said Mike. "Everything okay?" He was worried that the old

man might have fallen.

There was a crashing sound, this time louder, sounding like something metal striking the ground deliberately and violently. Then there was nothing. Mike and El were both standing now, both watching the back of the shop, both feeling their hearts pounding harder and harder. Both certain that this could not be a coincidence, that something had followed them from the school to the shop.

Something had been stalking them in the middle of the day.

The daytime had always felt like a sanctuary from the madness of the Upside Down. It was ridiculous, but it was almost like the daylight drove away the monsters. That of course wasn't true, as Billy had shown—but this couldn't be the Watcher... could it?

El stepped in front of Mike, her arm out. He watched her with pride, realizing he trusted her to handle whatever it was that might be back there. With any luck, the old man would come hobbling out, clutching his hip, and they could all laugh about it together.

Someone came out from the back then, but it wasn't the shopkeeper. It was someone they both recognized, someone who couldn't possibly be standing there for so many reasons. Someone who made their blood run cold and their hands shake.

"Hello, Eleven," said the American. "It's been such a long time. How you've grown."

9. Chapter 9: The Interlude

(A/N: Decided it might be a good idea to check in with the rest of Hawkins before the story really goes into overdrive. Sorry for the longer wait. The next chapter is already done and will be here soon. Thanks for reading!)

Steve was sitting in the break room at the Family Video, wondering what he was doing with his life. He had only one real friend and spent the rest of his time doing three things: working, sitting around at home, or babysitting freshmen. This was not how his life was supposed to have gone. He had been the hero of high school... and now here he was selling things that didn't know anything about, nor did he care about in the slightest. No girls in sight, no hope of change anywhere on the horizon.

To make things even worse, it seemed like the world was quickly coming to an end. Whatever the hell the rugrats had gotten themselves into seemed like it was way bigger than the messes that had happened in the past. Steve had started thinking about carrying around his bat with him, but only seriously considered that option for a second. What was a bat supposed to do against the portals? Or whatever was on the other side of them?

As much as it pained Steve to admit it, this was beyond him. Now that they had entered high school, they didn't need him as much as they did before. H knew that he needed to move on, but that was easier said than done. For a while now, he had derived his purpose from how he was taking care of the kids—or at least protecting them when he could. Now he just sold videos and thought about what might have been.

The bells above the front door jingled and Steve let out a sigh, standing up from his seat in the back room. He walked out to the counter, ready to greet whatever mouth-breather had just walked into the building.

"Hi, welcome to Family—" He stopped, because the person who was standing in the doorway was not someone he had expected to see today. "Robin? What are you doing here?"

"Just wanted to stop in and see how things were going," she said.

Steve raised an eyebrow.

"Okay, I was bored and wanted someone to talk to. Better?"

Steve grinned. "Glad to know I'm your last resort."

His relationship with Robin was a strange one. They had gone from barely tolerating each other, to him deciding that he had a massive crush on her, to him finding out that she had *absolutely* no interest in him (or men in general), to whatever they were now.

Surprisingly, at least to Steve, his ego hadn't taken too hard a hit when that shocking bit of information had come out to him. In retrospect, he figured he owed a lot of that to Nancy and to the kids. Yeah, Nancy hadn't treated him the best, but she had showed him there was value in acting like more than an arrogant ass. And the kids had showed him that he could handle responsibility. That he was more of an adult than he had ever given himself credit for.

Now he found himself being grateful for her friendship. Finding out that his feelings for her could never be returned was painful, for sure. But he had realized that what he really needed was a friend, not a girlfriend. Maybe later, after he worked on himself a little bit, that could change. It just wasn't time right now.

What the hell did those kids do to me? he wondered. Steve Harrington had never before been so introspective.

Robin joined him behind the counter, sitting down on one of the stools. "What's on your mind, Harrington?" she said. "And don't lie. I know that look."

Steve didn't necessarily want to admit what he was thinking out loud. It wasn't great for his image—the confident, cool, perfect head of hair wasn't *supposed* to have problems. Right?

But that excuse seemed lame now. Everyone knew that he had issues. Everyone knew that his life hadn't gone the way it was supposed. Jonathan Byers, a burnout if there ever was one, had a better thing going for him right now. Meanwhile Steve was stuck in the same

town, working part time at a dingy little video store.

"What the hell am I *doing* here?" he asked. "I mean, seriously? I know I need a job, I mean, that's not really the issue. I guess maybe the real question is, where am I going? What's the whole point? People like you or just... other people, they all have a destination in mind, right? Well I don't. I'm a mess. I'm doing the same thing, every single day, for no reason. And then outside? The frigging world is falling apart. Literally! And I'm just supposed to sit here and sling VHS tapes at people while a gang of literal *children* tries to save the world."

"We saved the world too," said Robin. "Well, maybe it was just the town, but that's already more than most people do in their whole lives."

"Yeah, but I don't want to peak right now," said Steve. "I still got three quarters of my life to go through. And I've got nothing going for me."

Robin looked like she wanted to make a snappy comeback, but then held it back. "I know," she said. "But you're not alone. You're not the only one."

"I wish that made me feel better," said Steve. "It just doesn't. Because yeah, I'm not the only one, but that doesn't help my situation."

"So what are you going to do about it?" asked Robin.

"Hell if I know," said Steve. "But if I have to sit here passing out tapes of a bunch of bullshit I don't care about for years, I'm going to lose my mind."

"Then you've got to make a plan!" said Robin, standing up. "So let's do it. Let's promise each other right now that we're going to find a way to get you out of here. Not just this store. But Hawkins. Get you out of here and get you moving somewhere else. Somewhere better."

Steve felt a wave of excitement rise inside him and then paused—there was something drastically wrong with the statement Robin had just made. "That's great, Robin. But I think you're forgetting something. What about you?"

Robin smiled, but the smile was sad. It was the face of someone who was resigned to a decision that had been made long ago. "I don't think that's gonna happen, hot shot. Just the way the world works. I'm always going to be a part of this town. I was never the heroine of any story. Not even mine."

Steve felt his excitement shatter and turn into sadness. "What if we changed that? What if we made you the heroine you were always supposed to be?"

"And how do you propose that, my knight in shining armor?"

Steve was stumped. "Okay, good point. But I think we both have a lesson to learn here—there's no reason for either of us to give up. Not on each other and not on ourselves. Think we can do that?"

Robin smiled. "I can do it if you can."

Steve sat back and sighed. "There's something about being trapped in a town like this that's just bad for the soul. Man wasn't meant to be caged up like this."

Robin snorted. "What would you even do in a big city anyway?"

Steve shrugged. "I don't know. But I'd be doing something more important than this. What would you do?"

"I'd find a place where I could really be me," she said. "Maybe even a place where I could find out who I was. Not just on the surface—but who I really was."

"You know you can be whoever you want with me," said Steve, feeling oddly self-conscious. "Always."

"I know," she said. "I'll always be grateful. You still forgive me?"

"For what?" he asked.

"Breaking your heart."

"Breaking my heart?" Steve pretended to roll his eyes. "You? Please. No one breaks Steve Harrington's heart."

"I wish you could have seen the look on your face," she said laughing. "That made it all worth it. Oh, did that make it worth it."

"That's not funny!" said Steve.

"It's a little funny. Okay, look. I'll make it up to you. Why don't we start looking for your future?"

"I have no future," muttered Steve darkly. "Just endless videos."

"What are you good at?" she asked.

"Serving ice cream!" said Steve. "And taking care of teenagers."

Robin cocked her head. "Jesus Christ," she said. "I think I have an idea."

Steve looked at her with caution. "What does that mean?"

"Well, Steve, have you ever thought about teaching?"

...

Joyce had spent the last few days in a whirlwind of activity and confusion. She was, of course, spending more and more time with Hopper, which was a fantastic feeling. After a long time of loneliness followed by hopelessness, it felt like something might actually work out for her and her family.

The question of whether or not they would return to Hawkins was hanging heavily over her head. The owner of the hotel they were still staying at had heard their story (or at least a version of it) and had decided to cut them a massive discount. At this point, they were practically staying for free until they could "get their feet underneath them" as the owner had put it.

It was something she needed to give some heavy consideration. On one hand, yes, she wanted to come back to be with Hopper, to give her kids some sense of normalcy. On the other hand, there wasn't anything normal about this place and it seemed like a good idea to stay as far away as possible from it.

She wondered if that made her a coward, if she was teaching her kids to run away from problems rather than fix them. It didn't seem like it—it was hardly cowardly to walk away from something as insane as what had happened in Hawkins—but on the other hand, Joyce hated giving up, even if it was on a town.

To complicate matters, Hopper had begun to seem like he was acting strange about... something. It had only been going on a few days and at first she had thought that she was imagining it. But then it had continued and she realized that he was being a bit cagey about one thing in particular. His job. Which confused her, because it wasn't like there was anything going on in Hawkins that required police secrecy of any real sort. The last time that had happened was... well, it had been the situation with Will.

She had tried asking Hopper about whatever it was that was going on. He had refused to give her a straight answer, downplaying all of her questions and trying to make it sound like nothing was going on. But while Hopper was a lot of things, a good liar was not one of them. She could tell there was something he was trying to keep from her and from the rest of the town.

She wasn't offended by it; she knew it was part of the job. Hopper was a smart man. If there was something that he didn't want the public to know, then there was probably a very good reason for it. But if Hopper was smart, she was curious, and if there was even the chance of a threat to her family, then she needed to know just what was going on.

Which was why Joyce was visiting the local RadioShack, in hopes of picking up a police scanner. She had never in her life thought that a RadioShack of all places would bring memories back to her, but that was what it did. She couldn't help but remember Bob and feel a twinge of guilt. It was misplaced guilt, of course. He would want her to be happy. He was such a kind and generous soul. But it was that same generosity and kindness that led her to feel guilty, like she was giving up on him in a way. He could never come back, she knew that. And she needed to move on. Even so, she had promised herself again and again that she would never forget what Bob Newby had done for her and her family.

Part of her felt like she was spying on Hopper, but she reminded herself that it wasn't anything personal. She just needed to know if there was anything going on in the town that was going to present danger to her family. Something that might affect her decision to return to Hawkins.

Yes, there was the business with the portals, and yes, that was definitely something she wanted to avoid. Strangely though, it felt like something she had already dealt with, something that they could handle if they were all together. She didn't *really* know how volatile the situation was, but she assumed that if it got too bad, one of the kids would say something. They always did, right? They weren't too old to get help from their mom yet.

She sighed. Who was she kidding? They were in high school now and they were not likely to tell her anything at all. That was why she needed the police scanner. She didn't want to be the type of mom who was spying on her kids all the time, but this was life or death stuff that they would probably not breathe a word of it to anyone, thinking they were doing the right thing.

She sighed as she picked it up off the shelf. If only people would take her more seriously. She had been the only one who hadn't given up on Will and she had been right then. Surely that had to count for something?

Part of her felt guilty for not trusting Hopper like this, but she knew he wasn't telling her the truth. He'd probably be annoyed later, but the two of them could work it out. She needed to know what was happening in her town. Hopper had been cagey at best and suspicious at worst, sharing fewer and fewer details every time he saw her, all the way up until his description of his work days had been condensed to a grunt, no matter how much she tried to get him to talk more about it.

In a way, it was typical Hopper. He was a man of few words in most circumstances, and it was not aided by tensions at his job. Ever since he had made it back from his months in the Upside Down, though, he had been a changed man in so many ways. He felt more honest now, saying things that she had known he was thinking, but that he never would have dared say before. He looked more comfortable sharing

his feelings, which was something he had never even been close to doing before.

It made her appreciate him more. She had always been drawn to his confidence and strength, and now he was demonstrating that strength in a different way. It was still early days for them, to be sure. But she found herself looking to the future and wondering what might come next.

But first, she thought. I need to figure out what's going on in this damn town.

...

Murray Bauman was frustrated. He had uncovered what had seemed like huge news, only to have it stymied, yet again, by those irritating children. Yes, he had been wrong about the identity of the man in captivity, but whoever it was no doubt possessed some sort of importance! Why else would they have been in Russian captivity in the first place?

He had spent the time since then trying to find out what had happened at the prison, but had made no progress. There was no one responding, and as far as he could tell, there was nothing even receiving. They hadn't found him out and were now ignoring him. Something far worse than that had happened.

The consequences of it might be meaningless. Whatever happened in Russia may very well have no effect on Hawkins, but if there was even the smallest chance that it might, he needed to treat it as an absolute certainty.

If the American wasn't Hopper, there was a small list of people that it could be. Whoever it was had to be directly related to the Hawkins lab incident, but Bauman couldn't find anyone who was missing from the incident that hadn't been killed in action. That meant someone's intel was wrong, which meant the whole exercise was likely pointless.

The only comfort he was able to take was that there was no way any of this could ever come back on him. He had maintained perfect

anonymity and to make things even better, he wasn't even in the cursed town. He thought of what had happened at the fair and wondered how many other people had gone missing or had been killed in silence, so that no one would ever know.

Bauman knew that many people considered him eccentric or even crazy. A misanthrope as well. But he knew he was more complicated than that. He knew the truth—that human history had demonstrated over and over that people were scum and were not to be trusted. He would do his part in exposing the corruption that was rapidly overtaking the human race. That was why he lived by himself in a place where no one could gain unwanted access to his house. He wanted to be outside the deterioration of human decency and normal values.

Also he didn't trust his enemies to not come for him. Lord knows he had made enough of those in his time as a writer. Expose enough people and they'll come for you. He would do what he could form his bunker, but he would not, under any circumstances, stick his neck out to get sliced off by a Russian guillotine, whatever that might be.

Part of him wanted to be able to do more for all those crazy people living in Hawkins. But the other part of him knew that it was a terrible idea that would only end in tears. What could they expect him to do? What could *they* expect to do? They were a handful of kids, a mom, and a wannabe fat Rambo. Going up against something as big and as bad as the Russian army? They didn't have a chance.

At least it was just humans and none of that otherworldly shit. At least it was things that made sense.

Murray Bauman leaned back in his chair and wished them all the best.

...

The investigation was continuing, and the facts that continued to appear were far from inspiring or enlightening. Over the past few days, Hopper and his team had uncovered more houses just like the first—either shacks that had been built entirely off the books or properties that were supposedly condemned or abandoned. Each of

them was full of dead bodies and painted with blood. Someone—or something—had entered in the Russian safehouses and eliminated everyone inside. With extreme prejudice.

The purpose of the houses was only partially clear. It appeared as if they had been a network designed for tracking someone. There were notes scattered around the apartment, along with photos of the town, but since any and all writing was in Russian, Hopper had no idea what any of it said.

He could guess, though. There were only a few people of note in Hawkins and they were all tied to him. El being the number one choice. They must not have known that she had left, which meant his plan had worked... until she had returned. It didn't matter though, since it seemed like every last Russian in Hawkins was dead. And if they weren't dead, they were on someone's list and would likely be dead very soon.

"What did we get ourselves into?" he muttered as he stepped around the latest shack. He was of course grateful to have been rescued by El, but part of him wished she hadn't come back. He doubted he ever would have made it out—or would have survived for much longer—but she could have been safe. For the rest of her life. The further away from this crazy town she was, the better.

Maybe I should convince Joyce to leave again, he thought. I could go with them this time. Just forget about all of this. Start over somewhere new.

It was a nice thought, but not a realistic one. He couldn't bring himself to leave behind the town, not when he knew what sort of thing might be stalking it at any given moment. Hawkins may not have been his idea of the perfect place to live, but there was a sort of responsibility tying him to it now. He couldn't leave.

And what would I be showing El? He thought. That it's okay to just run away from your problems? Is that the kind of example I want to set?

It was strange because that hadn't been something he needed to think about for a very long time. And yet here he was, considering the kind of example he was setting for... his daughter.

"Chief, what's the plan?" asked Callahan, startling Hopper out of his thoughts. "What's going on here? I mean, you clearly know more than what you're telling us."

Hopper sighed. "Would you believe me if I told you that you don't want to know? Because I promise you really don't want to know."

"Is it the feds?" Powell asked. "I think this town has had enough of *that* nonsense."

"It's the feds," said Hopper. "And worse. I've been running interference on this for a long time and I don't want it getting out now."

"You can trust us," said Powell, "but I'd feel a lot better if I knew what I was getting tangled up in."

"You're better off not knowing," said Hopper. "You wouldn't believe me anyway."

"Does it have to do with Starcourt?" asked Callahan, demonstrating a rare moment of clarity. "Because I have to be honest with you, a lot of that story did not add up. No one asked questions because the answer was convenient and easy, but I know what a fire looks like, and that was no fire I've ever seen. Also, what the hell happened to your cabin?"

Hopper shook his head and raised his hands. "No, no, no. You don't want to do this. There's some bad shit going down, I think you know that. And I am telling you, not as your superior, but as a fellow human being—you don't want any part of this."

Callahan nodded slowly, looking a little disappointed. Not that he didn't know the truth but that Hopper insisted on keeping secrets. "Yeah, chief, if that's how it is, I get it. But we know something's up, okay? We've known for a while. And we've respected your privacy, but I don't want you to think we're a pack of idiots."

"I don't think you're an idiot," said Hopper, despite developing that exact belief over the last few years. "I'm just trying to do the right thing here."

"At what point is the right thing going to the press?" asked Powell. "Because this is a lot of dead bodies. Way too many for my liking."

"As soon as I can get a handle on this," said Hopper. "We're in control of this. No one else."

It wasn't true, as much as he wanted it to be. He did not have control, nor did he see a way for them to get a grip on what was occurring. The reason was simple—whatever had happened was done, and they were just picking up the pieces. There was no way to be proactive because it was already done.

If this goes after El, I don't know what I'll do.

He knew what he would have to do—trust her to handle it on her own. It was the hardest thing in the world for him—to step back and admit that there was nothing he could do. He needed to give her the space and freedom to do things on her own, especially when he couldn't offer her any real help.

I'm not ready for her to grow up. Not yet.

He feared that he would not be given the chance to prepare himself.

...

If Max had anything to say about the world she now lived in, it would most likely be filled with profanity. Never had she imagined that this kind of thing was even possible outside the movies, but now it was her daily life. In a way, there was some sort of poetry to her falling into the party. Max had always been a bit of an outsider for one reason or another—somehow, she had found a group of people who were just like her.

Not that she would ever admit it, except maybe to El. And Lucas. Lucas was the strangest find out of the whole group. A boyfriend was quite honestly the furthest thing from her mind as she had focused on surviving the move with psycho Billy. Even after meeting him a few times, the thought had never even come close to crossing her mind.

In fact, when she thought back, she couldn't even really remember where the idea had come from. It had just felt natural, and that's why

she had known it was good. Now, she appreciated him more than ever. He let her be her own person, even when he didn't understand. Little by little, she was beginning to help him see more of how the world really worked—or maybe how the world *should* work.

He was a work in progress. But then again, weren't they all?

What was happening now, though, was... different. Max, for the first time, felt like something was changing. It wasn't the way she looked at the world. It wasn't even necessarily the world. It was *her*. It was her friends. They were all changing, and she didn't know how to stop it. Not physically, though, yeah, they were getting taller. On the inside.

They were growing up.

Max felt like she was the only one who had noticed. The guys had stopped caring about D&D, had started spending time doing other things. Yeah, they were still dorks, but they were different now. El had made them watch *Blade Runner*, of all things (granted, Lucas hadn't understood it, but they could work on that later).

When this was all over, what would happen? Would they just go back to being friends? Or would they keep changing until they felt like different people? It was hard to say. More importantly, would there be anything left to go back to, or would that... thing have its way with reality?

She spent a long time thinking about what had happened a few months ago. She didn't think she was ready for something like that to happen again. Could anyone really ever be ready for something like that?

The most painful part of the whole ordeal, of the anticipation, was that she knew all too well how real the stakes were. She had lost her brother—moments after he had at least made an attempt to redeem himself. That event had changed her. She had seen the possibility for redemption and it had altered the way she looked at the world. Prior to that, she had written Billy off—and realistically, who could blame her? He was a racist and a bigot, an anger-fueled bully that cared about little more than himself. But El had show Max that there was

someone else that Billy did care about, someone who had long since passed on. And in the end, Billy had shown them all that there was still part of the old him left, even if it was only a small part.

It didn't excuse the things he had done in the past, Max knew that. But it showed he was still human, even if he had seemed more and more like a monster with every passing day.

In a way, she was glad that their current enemy was a faceless, nameless entity. It made it less personal, which made it easier to hate the thing itself. When it had been Billy, even when Bill yhad been wildly out of control, completely under the influence of the Mind Flayer, she had always felt like there was a part of her that struggled to feel negatively towards him. In the end, it hadn't mattered, as El has managed to break through the control and help him return to who he really was.

She hoped that she never needed to deal with something like that again. She couldn't imagine what it would be like to lose one of the party—they were like her family now and she would do anything for them. Even if she still liked to pretend that they were annoying at the best of times. It was just what she did. The same way Lucas could be so argumentative or Dustin could be an complete mess or Mike could overprotective of everyone. Yeah, they were flaws, but it was the little things that made each of them who they were.

Max sighed and sat up on her bed. Her head had been spinning in circles for hours. It was hard to relax with the potential end of the world hanging over the horizon. She needed to do something fun. Maybe El wanted to hang out? She would give her friend a call.

Max reached for the phone, wondering how El was doing. The girl seemed to handle things better than everyone else. But then again, with childhood experiences like that, she probably had a lot of practice.

...

Millions of years ago, reality was very different.

This is a fact that no living human being knows, because how could

they? Perhaps in their strangest dreams, there are some who might have gotten the barest glimpse of what once was, but even they can only come close to knowing a fraction, because the full truth would be more than enough to drive any person mad.

Before order existed, there was chaos, and nothing else. A mingling of planes, a mixing of realities, so far different than the normalcy that we have become used to today. Reality was still malleable, still being shaped by forces other than physics, being moved in ways that are no longer seen as possible.

The Watcher could see all. Existence was not measured in distance at that point. Existence was measured in terms of concepts, abstract things that were closer to what we call "thoughts" today. The Watcher was formless, as was much of existence. He had no designated shape, was not bound to the restrictive limiting form that El had seen him in.

Madness was the only universal characteristic. There was no such thing as logic or planning, nothing existed in the same form as it would in the future. There was no purpose, nothing but randomness.

It could never last.

The great shaping happened at two rates—instantaneously and for countless years. The conflict began in the same way all conflicts begin—opposing ideologies. There was something else that existed, something that had been born on the edge of the infinite chaos, something that demanded a shape be imposed on all of existence.

There is a misconception that many humans have that has persisted throughout all of history: the idea that chaos is evil and order is good. The truth is that the titles of "good" and "evil" were ideas created by humans, terms that are inherently meaningless.

Chaos is a state that is at odds with humanity's natural existence. It is something humanity cannot survive in. Thus, it is something we have designated as evil.

The Watcher, along with the rest of the formless void was forced out, placed somewhere that it could never touch the newly imposed order

ever again. And it began to watch. And it began to see what had happened to the beautiful emptiness that it had come from.

It watched as humanity sprung up from the ashes, as the world began to turn and evolve, as order took shape. And the Watcher began to hate. To resent what had happened to what had come before. The Watcher stared out from its prison, stared past the buffer of the Upside Down, and knew what it needed to do. It needed to do more than watch. It needed to change the world.

There would be many centuries, even millennia, spent observing, remembering the way the world used to be. There used to be so much more, an infinite space, full of the concepts that would become other beings like the Watcher, beings that were now locked away outside of reality, never again to drift through the void.

Unless something changed.

The Watcher's plan was simple, though vast in scale. The worlds would be united, as they were meant to be. The order that now structured everything would be thrown away, to be replaced by the ever-changing chaos that had once existed. Every being that had been lost after the chaos has been dispersed would be free once more and there would be no more prisons. No more barriers. Nothing but the natural order.

All those years of hatred and frustration would melt away in an instant as time ceased to have meaning and thought became form once more. And it would be all thanks to one girl, one girl with the power to shake worlds.

Thousands of years had gone by in this prison cell of a realm. The Watcher could wait a few more days.

...

El stared at the face in front of her and felt a tumultuous wave of memories come crashing down around her. Nothing made sense. She genuinely wondered for the briefest of moments if she was even awake or if what she was looking at was a dream. But Mike's terrified face next to her told her everything she needed to know. It was real.

This man was actually standing there in the ice cream shop, blood dripping from his hands, blood that El knew belonged to the old man who had served them ice cream.

The man's clothing was similar to what El remembered, but it fit poorly, like the man had stolen it from someone else. There was blood on the clothing as well, dried blood, and El wondered how the man had gotten into the shop in the first place without anyone seeing him. Surely that sight would have alerted someone.

"You—you can't be here," she said.

"And yet clearly I am," the American said, his voice quiet and sinister. "Strange how that works?"

He should have been dead. There was no way for him to be alive. But then El remembered one fact that made her blood run cold and reminded her just how little she knew about the insane world she inhabited—she had never seen his body.

That would change.

"I'm going to kill you," she said. Because any loyalty or affection she had ever felt for this man was long gone, now that she knew what real love was.

"I wouldn't do that," the American said, gesturing outside. "It's liable to... get messy."

Mike grabbed El's hand, trying to pull her away.

"I wouldn't do that either," said the American. "That isn't how this goes."

"Tell me how this goes," said El, her face furious.

"It's simple," said Dr. Martin Brenner. "You're going to come with me. And then we're going to change the world. All will be as it must be. As it once was."

Dr. Martin Brenner raised his hands and the ground in the shop began to shake.

One thin trickle of blood ran out of El's nose.

10. Chapter 10: The Confrontation

(A/N: We made it to ten chapters! Thanks again to everyone who is reading and reviewing. For me, the end is in sight, though I don't know how long it will take to get there. Apologies for chapter delays, life has gotten slightly busier. I hope you enjoy.)

Brenner had powers. El didn't understand any of what was happening. She didn't understand how Brenner was back, let alone how he was able to do the same sort of thing that she could. El could feel him trying to shape the world around them and she was struggling to hold it all in place, knowing that if she slipped up for even a moment, something catastrophic would happen.

"El, what's going on?" asked Mike, his voice nervous. "How is he—?"

"You've seen the truth!" said Brenner, his voice beginning to rise. "You know what's coming. You know how inevitable it is."

"Not inevitable," said El. "You need me first."

"You really think I'm going to struggle to take you?" sneered Brenner. "You? You barely even understand your powers. I have seen everything. I have seen the source and the destination. I know where we come from and where we are going. It is far bigger than you or me."

There was something in Brenner's eyes, something beyond the naked ambition and cruelty that El remembered all too well. El had learned that Brenner had never really been her father, that the only thing he had ever wanted to use her for was her power, to exploit whatever capabilities she might have. It was strange though—in the past, he had been focused on such human things, like spying on Russians or harnessing energy. This, whatever this was that he was talking about, was something very different. What had happened to him?

The ground continued to shake and tiny bits of the floor began to splinter off and float up into the air. El had extended one of her hands, trying to hold the building together around them. She was unclear what might happen if she failed to do so, but instinctively

knew it would be a terrible mistake.

"What happened to you?" El asked, hoping to distract him, keep him talking.

"I've seen what lies beyond," said Brenner. "The Upside Down is what you call it. But there is so much more than the mirror image of our world. So much more."

"This is the only world I need," said El.

Brenner laughed. "Look at you! Look how far you've come! Speaking in sentences, finding a boy, finding a family... you even met your mother. A shame, what happened to her, wasn't it? She won't be able to see the beauty of what you are going to achieve."

El knew that Brenner was only trying to rattle her. He wanted her off her game, her concentration thrown. The issue was that it was working. He was making her angry; he was bringing her back to memories that she had thought she had long grown past, trauma that had shaped her but that she had thought to have moved on from.

The ground began to shake harder. Mike tugged at her hand. "El, we need to go!" Yes, Brenner had threatened them, but Mike didn't trust a word that snake said.

"Tell me how you're alive," demanded El, shrugging off Mike's hand, who stopped trying to lead her away but did not back away from his girlfriend.

"The creature attacked me," said Brenner. "But it didn't kill me. My life was saved by one of my men... or someone I thought was one of my men."

The expression on his face was so full of rage that it made El shiver. She wondered if she really wanted to know what had happened to him.

"He was a mole. The Russians had infiltrated us without us even knowing it. He chased the creature away and took me into captivity. It had been the perfect moment for the Russians. Disruption and a smokescreen while they captured the program's biggest asset: me." He

paused. "Biggest asset, that is, except for you."

"They kept me imprisoned, smuggling me out of the country, keeping me in captivity, hoping that one day my knowledge would be useful. They didn't bother torturing me because they knew I wasn't an engineer and they needed tech. That was the only thing that spared me. What they didn't know was that I was changing. The creature, after it had attacked me, had infected me. I say infected only because there is no better word, though I do not see it as a negative. It filled me with knowledge, with visions of what had been and what will be. It gave me purpose. It connected me."

El understood then. The man standing before her was not Brenner anymore, not really. He had the body of Brenner and the memories of Brenner, but behind his cold eyes as someone else. Something else.

"It connected you to the Watcher," El breathed, horrified. The Watcher had been directing Brenner's movements this whole time. That explained why he had abilities and how he had been tracking her. "What did you do?"

"I kept you safe!" said Brenner. "You think the Russians were going to back down just because you threatened them? Because you can move something with your mind? That would never be enough! So I did exactly what I needed to so that no one would ever harm you. You should be thanking me."

"I will never thank you," said El. "Never." She knew how abusive and terrible Brenner had been now. She remembered what he had done to her mother, someone who had only ever wanted to protect her daughter.

"You would be dead without me!" screamed Brenner. El saw that the once brilliant, though psychopathic, man was now gone, replaced by madness and obsession. Replaced by the hallmark of the Watcher.

"I would rather be dead than go with you," retorted El. She knew Mike would hate it, but it was the truth. She would never allow herself to be a prisoner again.

"Unfortunately for you," said Brenner, "that's not an acceptable

option."

The building exploded around them.

El wasn't sure what had exactly happened—had her control slipped? Had he overpowered her? In either case, both her and Mike were sent flying backwards, tumbling onto the ground, while piles of rubble and dust clouds formed around them. The ice cream shop was completely gone and there was no trace of the tranquil moment they had been enjoying only a few minutes ago.

"Mike!" El struggled to rise to her feet, wavering as she stood. She could see him lying on the ground, only a few feet away, but he wasn't moving and it looked like there was blood on his forehead.

If Brenner hurt him...

She wanted to go check on Mike but knew there wasn't time. Brenner was *right here* and the damage he could do if she left him unchecked was catastrophic. He had already killed a good number of people, and who knew what other atrocities he had committed while pursuing his insane dream?

Not his insane dream. The Watcher's.

She had to remind herself that Brenner was gone. Of course, she didn't have any connection to him anymore (not that she ever had) but now she didn't even have to consider the moral implications. Brenner had been a monster, on the inside and out. Now, there was nothing human left to him at all.

Good. That'll make this easy.

Her other biggest concern at the moment was what anyone might be thinking if they were watching the situation unfold. It was likely to be causing a huge scene and she could already hear Hopper warning her against using her powers in public. She needed to get Mike out of there and she needed to get Brenner away from the rest of the town.

El didn't see the slap coming. Brenner was standing behind her and slightly to the side, and her attention had been so focused that she had completely missed him. His hand descended with blurring speed,

striking her face and sending her toppling to the ground, crying out.

"You're coming with me," said Brenner. "Let's go."

El raised her head to shout for help, knowing that there would be someone on the street nearby—someone had to have heard the explosion, right? But Hawkins appeared to be a ghost town. There was no one to answer her call. Not one person in view.

She began to wonder if there was more going on that what there appeared to be.

Mike was trying to pick himself up off the ground, but was struggling to get himself off his hands and knees.

Brenner lifted an eyebrow. "Pathetic," he said. "People like you and me were meant for so much more than these common rabble." He stepped away from El, towards Mike.

El lifted a hand. "Don't," she said. There was no pleading in her voice. No fear. It was not a question. It was a command. "Don't touch him."

Brenner smirked. "I don't need to touch him."

The implication was clear and it was more than enough to push El over the edge. She didn't need to be able to stand to face Brenner. Instead, she reached out with her mind, pushing herself into the air, floating above the ground around her.

"Stay *away*!"

Her voice broke as she screamed, and the force of the power flowing out of her sent Brenner careening backwards. The piles of rubble were blasted outwards into the eerily empty streets. Brenner skidded along the ground, sliding into what remained of one of the walls.

El landed on the ground, staggering slightly, still feeling off balance.

"Good," said Brenner, as he stood. "Good. This is what you were made for. A weapon."

El thrust a hand out, tossing Brenner to the ground again, no longer

caring who might be watching. Beyond what little remained of the building, she could see that the town of Hawkins was beginning to shimmer and fade, like it was starting to disappear. Like it wasn't really there.

El dragged her attention away from her surroundings and brought them back to Brenner. "You don't get to have us," she said. "I'm not yours anymore."

"Prove it," he said. "Because you look like the same, scared, helpless little girl that I used to know."

El raised a hand, ready to shatter every bone in Brenner's body when she heard a voice from behind her.

"Don't do it," Mike croaked. "It's what he wants."

El's concentration broke and she lowered her arm. "What?"

"Look!" said Mike, pulling himself to his feet. "Look what's happening—he's using you!"

El looked where Mike was indicating and saw what he meant. The shimmering, disappearing world had not come back into focus. Was this Brenner's plan? To use her power to pull them through into the other world?

Brenner's lip curled. "You think you understand? You know *nothing*."

El shook her head. "I'm not you. I never will be. I am better than you."

"You're a tool!" spat Brenner.

"You are nothing," said El. She raised her hand one last time, this time not intending to kill him. She shoved him the side and watched as the world around her began to come back into focus. "You mean nothing to me."

Brenner's voice was little more than a malevolent whisper. "You and I both know that isn't true."

El could begin to hear the sound of sirens and approaching voices and she knew that whatever had nearly happened with the world around them had been averted. She looked back to Brenner, only to find that he was no longer there. She spent only the briefest of moments wondering where he had gone before she decided that she didn't need to know that badly. She just needed to make sure Mike was okay.

"Mike?" she said, touching his shoulder softly. He was leaning heavily against one of the ruined walls. The sirens were getting louder and louder and the first people could be seen rapidly approaching from all sides.

"I'm okay, I think," he said, but he didn't look okay. He looked like he was dazed and only barely conscious. He must have slammed into the wall hard. "Where did he go?"

"I don't know," said El, looking around. "He's gone."

"It's okay," said Mike, slumping down a little. "Help's on the way."

The first of the emergency responders were there, paramedics running in, rushing up to the two teens, while others ran past them to find the body of the shopkeeper. The paramedics were saying things like "What happened here?" and "Did you see anything?" but El felt too numb to respond. All she could do was hold Mike and try not to cry.

"Hopper will be here soon," said Mike, sounding like he was on the verge of passing out.

El knew Mike was just saying that and she wondered if he was possibly concussed. It was one of the things that Hopper had tried to teach her about when he had been teaching her different survival techniques and information she might need to know if she was in a fight.

But Mike wasn't wrong. It was only a few minutes later that Hopper's police car came speeding up to the scene, sirens blaring, tires squealing. He practically tripped and fell while getting out of the car, that's how fast he was moving. "El! Wheeler! What the hell

happened? Are you okay?"

El gave him a huge hug and stammered into his shoulder. "It was Brenner," she said. "He's back."

Hopper stepped back, his hands on El's shoulders. "Are you sure?" he said.

"Yes," said El. "He was here."

Hopper's face was a mix of fear and anger. "We need to get you out of here—oh Jesus." He saw the paramedics standing over the corpse of the shopkeeper, which had been mutilated. "Shit. Wheeler, can you walk?"

Mike nodded, but Hopper could tell with a glance that something was wrong. He reached into his belt and pulled out a pen flashlight. "Look at this," he said, shining it into Mike's eyes. A moment later and Hopper's suspicions were confirmed. "You're concussed," he said.

One of the paramedics tried to approach Mike, but Hopper shrugged them off. "I got this," he said. "I'm gonna take them to the station. I'll sort this out there."

"But sir—"

"I don't recall asking for a second opinion, doc," said Hopper. "Let's go, kids." The three of them walked to Hopper's car, leaving the confused paramedic both literally and figuratively in the dust.

...

The drive to the station passed in silence. Hopper didn't know what to say and he didn't want to disturb either of the kids, who were both sitting in the back, holding each other. Mike seemed badly concussed, barely conscious, and El looked like she had survived a minor war.

His mind working on overdrive. Brenner's return made little sense, but it could explain who had been doing the killing. The building being torn down combined with the fact that El hadn't ripped the man's head off right away meant that something strange had occurred. Was it possible that Brenner had been able to defend

himself?

The only way Hopper could even think of someone being able to defend themselves from El was with powers of their own. But Brenner didn't have powers, did he? Unless he had developed them in his return from the dead, which Hopper had to admit was more than a little possible.

The implications were disturbing. Brenner was clearly unhinged, no longer working for any organization that might be able to keep him in check. So where were they supposed to go from here? Hopper supposed that on the bright side, this meant no one was going to be checking up for what happened to Brenner, so if a bullet just happened to find its way into the man's skull... then no one would miss him.

Hopper knew that it was time to come clean about what had been going on in Hawkins. On the bright side, this provided the perfect cover. He could easily tie the two crimes together. The body at the scene of the ice cream shop looked almost identical to the other bodies he had found. He wondered if Brenner had been working with someone else but didn't see how anyone could possibly work with someone who was so clearly deranged.

He pulled the kids into his office and closed the door.

"Listen," he said. "I can't keep you here long, the medics are going to lose their minds if they can't look at you. But you need to tell me everything that's happened."

El swallowed hard and proceeded to do exactly that. When she had finished, Hopper was looking at her with a very red face, visibly furious though trying to calm himself.

"You didn't tell me all of that?" he managed to get out. "You were... seeing all those things and you didn't tell me?"

Mike spoke up for the first time. He still looked dazed, but not as pale or sickly as before. "Things just happened so fast."

For once, Hopper understood Wheeler's words perfectly.

El knew why he was upset, but the truth was that she hadn't even intended on keeping anything a secret. It had just sort of happened that way. "What have you not told me?" El asked, knowing that Hopper had been acting a bit strangely as well.

Hopper paused, surprised to have been caught in the lie. Then he sat back in his chair and exhaled. "There's no manual for having kids," he said. "There's no manual for dealing with kids either, but Christ, there really should be. I'm sorry. Maybe I should have said something earlier, but I really didn't want to upset anyone. We've been finding bodies. Russian bodies. The remains of the ones who were here before."

"The ones who attacked us," said Mike. "Who did it?"

"Brenner," said El. "With his powers. The Watcher is making him do it. He said he needs me. He was afraid they would hurt me."

Hopper nodded. "I was thinking the same thing. Problem is, he's gone, and he could be literally anywhere seeing as he has those powers now." Hopper took a deep breath. "No more secrets from now on, okay? Let's just keep our cards on the table. Only way we can do this is by trusting each other. Do you trust me?"

"Yes," said El, meaning it wholeheartedly.

"And I trust you," said Hopper. "Wheeler, you I'm not so sure about, but we'll get there."

Mike grinned weakly.

Hopper stood up. "Now let's get you to the hospital. Because I am not about to have your mother suing the police department over this."

...

Joyce was beside herself with emotion. She was upset, relieved, and angry all at once. Upset that something so terrible had happened. Relieved that everyone was okay. And angry at Hopper for not telling her about the bodies beforehand.

"What were you *thinking*?" she demanded.

Hopper, to his credit, did look genuinely sorry. "I didn't want to cause a panic—not that I thought you were going to panic, but I just wanted to stay on top of it. I guess maybe I thought I was going to be able to keep it all under control. That clearly didn't happen."

"Yes, clearly it didn't. Haven't you learned anything? You can't accomplish *anything* without me!"

Hopper rolled his eyes. "I guess I should have taken you up on the offer for deputization and then everything would have worked out just fine."

"Yeah, maybe you should have!" Joyce retorted. Then she threw her arms around Hopper and hugged him tightly. "You could have died."

Hopper returned the hug. "Yeah," he said. "I could have. But that's part of the job. That's just the way things go. I have to do this because there's no one else who will."

"I will," said Joyce. "Let me help you."

Hopper sighed. "I want to. Believe me. I want as much help as I can get. But do you know why I do this job? I do it to keep people safe. I do it to keep families together. And if I let you in on something like this, that's one more family at risk. That's not acceptable to me."

"That's not fair and you know it. What am I supposed to do, just sit at home while you take all the risks?"

"Since when have you *ever* sat at home and waited?" asked Hopper. "What I tell you has never made a difference. But that doesn't mean I have to give you a badge and start taking you to literal murder scenes."

Joyce was frustrated, but at the same time she understood what Hopper was saying. She wanted to tell him that if the situations were flipped, she wouldn't be doing the same thing, but that wasn't true. "I'm not happy about this," she said.

"I know," said Hopper. "And I respect that. But your kids need you. They're dealing with things we never would have been able to imagine, even just a few years ago."

"What about El? She needs you."

Hopper paused, because that was something that had been on his mind as well. "You're right. But if something happens to me, I know she's going to have other people. Your kids only have you." He softened his tone. "Joyce, trust me on this. You saw what happened beneath Starcourt. This is not something I want you involved in."

"I am involved in it," she said. "As long as you're involved in it, I am."

"Joyce. Please. I know you can handle it. I know what you've done. I know that when everyone else had given up hope, you were right there, paying attention and solving problems that no one else was even thinking about. But this time, you need to do what you do best—protect the people you love the most."

Joyce bit her lip. After a moment, she said, "Okay. But I'm not happy about it. And I'm only doing it because I trust you."

"I'm doing it for the same reason," said Hopper. "Thank you."

When Hopper left the hotel room only a few minutes later, Joyce made a decision. She couldn't run away from her past forever. Hopper was living proof of that—he was a man who had spent years trying to run away from his past, only to realize that the best way to deal with it was to confront it head on. Joyce would do the same thing. She was no coward. She would not run away from her hometown, even if the memories that had formed in it were less than positive.

I'll just have to make better ones, she thought.

Then she reached for the newspaper. They were going to need a new house.

...

"This doesn't make any sense," said Lucas. "How can he be alive? We all saw what happened to him."

"He's alive," said El, for what felt like the hundredth time.

"Yes," said Lucas, "I heard. But the Demogorgon ate him! We saw it!"

Mike shook his head. "Technically that's not true. We saw it attack him but we didn't see what happened after. Anything could have happened."

Lucas hung his head, muttering to himself. "What kind of world is it when the bad guy gets attacked by the monster and doesn't even die? That's just messed up."

"So what do we do now?" Will asked.

It was a good question. After Mike had been discharged from the hospital with stern instructions to take care of his concussion, nothing had happened. El hadn't been sure if Brenner was going to immediately return or if there would be a lull. It seemed like the latter was true.

"Need to stop him," said El.

Dustin looked thoughtful. "Hang on. He needs you to open it, right? And it sounded like he was trying to get you to use your powers to do it. So what if you just... didn't use your power?"

Max glared at Dustin. "Your solution is just for her to stop being who she is? That's not how that's supposed to work at all."

Dustin shrugged. "It was just a suggestion."

"She shouldn't have to change herself to stop him from acting like a madman," said Max. "Not an option."

El nodded. "Not acceptable." She was who she was and she was not going to change herself for Brenner of all people.

"So then what?" asked Dustin. "It's not like we can just walk up to him and hit him with the wrist rocket."

"It'll be El," said Mike. "What else can we do? I don't think there's going to be much of a we in the end, is there? This is her story now. Maybe it always was."

"No," said El. "Not true. I can't do it with the party. Without friends."

The group looked at each other and smiled. Even after everything that they had been through, even after some of them had literally walked out of hell, even after they'd faced down monsters straight out of a nightmare—they were still friends.

"No matter what happens, we'll have each other," said Mike. "High school, alternate dimensions, ancient evils... it can't change that."

It felt like something was changing. Not their ages and not their relationships, but something in the air. It felt like the end of an era, but also the beginning of a new one. El was afraid of what would happen—of what she would have to face. She knew that in the end, it would be her standing alone against the Watcher and Brenner. Her friends, though they supported her, just couldn't go with her. At the same time though, she was excited for the future, because even the slightest chance of being able to move past this madness was almost unthinkable.

"When it's over," said El, "what do I do?"

The party didn't know what to say. The question was strange, but in El's mind, made perfect sense. Her entire life had been her living as a weapon—having a specific purpose, whether it was for Brenner or to keep her friends safe. Now though, things had the possibility of being different.

"Whatever you want," said Mike. "It's your life. You can do anything you want now, you know that, right?"

El smiled, even though there really was no choice. She needed to protect the people she loved. It was the only option she could take and manage to live with. "I love all of you," she said. "Thank you."

Dustin wiped his eye and then coughed into his hand, trying to hide the fact that there were more than a few tears trying to escape. "What's the big deal? Everything is going to be fine."

El wished she could believe that as strongly as he did. She told herself that it would be fine, that she would succeed in her mission,

whatever it may turn out to be. The thing was, she had seen time and time again how everything might *not* work out, how fairy tales weren't real. Her mama was proof of that. A woman whose only crime was being guilty of trying to rescue her own daughter—rendered brain dead for her efforts.

El tried to appear cheery, to show more happiness than she felt. Yes, she loved her friends and would be eternally grateful for the family they had built around her. And if everything worked out, she would be thrilled to be able to spend her life with them, growing old and changing, but never falling out of the bonds they had formed.

If things didn't go according to plan... then she was glad that she had the chance to get to know them.

She was tired. And she just wanted it all to end.

...

Beyond the void, the Watcher observed more portals opening, forming patterns that would have been indiscernible to anyone or anything else. The girl had escaped yet again and the Watcher's servant had been forced to flee.

It didn't matter. With every portal that opened across the globe, more of the Watcher's power leaked out. Its strength was increasing rapidly and soon the girl would have no way to escape the clutches of the other world.

The Upside Down.

The name felt like an insult—it was more than a simple reflection. What had been done to reality was nothing short of a travesty, one that needed to be corrected. The natural order demanded it. The Watcher would do just that.

The humans were petty and weak, always squabbling with one another, and that would be their downfall. It was yet another reason why they did not deserve to inherit the reality that they walked about in.

They understood *nothing*. They had thought the Mind Flayer to be the

true threat, but the Watcher had consumed that relic shortly after its final failure. All of the Upside Down was fodder for the Watcher.

The humans had never been able to see the true scale of what was going on. So wrapped up in their own insignificant problems to see beyond their minuscule lifespans. Concepts like love and loyalty. Legacy, life, and death. These thoughts were foreign to the Watcher and they always would be. There was only one thing that the Watcher understood of the humans:

Fear.

He could sense their fear, through the portals. With every new aperture, the fear grew stronger. Every human that was near one of the open portals contributed to that atmosphere, filling the air with their emotions, lending their power to the Watcher.

In the place beyond the Upside Down, the Watcher could feel the passing of time. The walls of the prison were beginning to break down and would not hold for much longer. After that, the only thing left to do was to acquire the girl. She could not remain hidden forever.

There was nowhere left for her to hide.

...

El somehow convinced Hopper to let her spend the night at the Wheeler household. Mike somehow convinced his mother to let El stay, despite school. Neither of them could believe their luck, though Mike knew that the real reason was most likely due to the trauma both had experienced. Mrs. Wheeler had assumed they had been the victim of some sort of gas explosion, whereas Hopper was probably just happy to be doing his job without having to worry about El for the moment.

Mike reflected that it seemed like Hopper was becoming more and more comfortable with the relationship. It was hard to believe but also very uplifting. Yes, Hopper was a hero and had saved their lives multiple times, but that didn't mean he couldn't be terrifying whenever he wanted to. Mike supposed that could be said about most

fathers though and tried to not take it too personally. El, Mike, and Hopper had reached some sort of unspoken agreement that led to a level of mutual trust and respect between all of them.

Which Mike was going to try and take advantage of as much as possible.

"Where's El going to sleep?" asked Mike's mom. She didn't understand at all how Mike and El knew each other and she thought there was something odd about Hopper suddenly adopting this girl out of the blue. She could have also sworn that she had seen El somewhere before but couldn't quite place it... it wasn't like Mike had a ton of female friends.

"We were going to be in the basement," said Mike, wincing at where the conversation was headed. El was already down there, waiting for him.

Mike's mom raised an eyebrow. "Together? In the basement? I don't know about that... what would Hopper think? What do you think?" She looked towards her husband, who was sitting in an reclining chair, reading the newspaper.

"Hmm," grunted Mike's father, without looking up.

"Hopper would be cool with it!" said Mike quickly. "He knows we're both responsible. And anyway, he's out on a case right now, so he's not around." He added that last part for good measure. This was not a topic he wished to address with Hopper.

Mike's mother shrugged. "If you say so. Just make sure you're up in the morning."

Mike nodded eagerly and abruptly turned, ready to run back down into the basement.

"And Mike!"

He stopped and turned around, slowly and annoyed. "Yes?"

"Give her the couch," his mom said. "Be a gentleman."

Mike restrained himself from rolling his eyes. "Of course, mom." He left the room before she could say anything else that he didn't need to hear.

In the basement, El had already changed into something more comfortable, which just happened to include one of Mike's shirts. A shirt he had been missing for several months.

"Wait a second..." he said. "Where did you...?"

El grinned. "Oops," she said.

"You took it!" he said. "I've been trying to find that one for ages!"

"It was comfy," she said defiantly. "I needed it more than you did."

He sat next to her on the couch and laughed. "I guess maybe you did. It looks good on you."

She looked at it and frowned. It was faded and worn and way too big for her. "Not true," she said. "But thanks, Mike."

He put her arm around her and just sat there for a moment. "Are you okay?" he asked. Because the past day had been a trial unlike anything they had faced in quite some time.

El shook her head. "I'm scared."

"Me too. I can't believe Brenner's back," said Mike.

"Not Brenner. I'm not scared of him anymore. I'm scared of me."

Mike looked at El with surprise. "Scared of yourself? What? Why?"

El was clearly struggling to find the words to describe what she was talking about. "I don't know what I am. I'm me. I'm a person. But I'm a weapon too. The Watcher wants me to do something terrible and I don't know if I can stop it. Because I don't really know what it wants and I don't really know what I am."

Mike understood, even if she was having trouble explaining.

"I don't want to stop being me," she said. "I want to go to school. I want to go to dances. I want to be with you and the party. What if I can't do that anymore? What if I never should do that? Because I'm different. And dangerous."

"El, we're all different—" Mike began to answer, but she cut him off before he could finish.

"I know we're different," said El. "But not like me. No one is different like me. And no one knows what I am. Not even me. I know I'm a person but what person is like this? No one."

Mike opened his mouth to respond, but nothing came out. He didn't say anything because he didn't know what else to say. After a moment, he decided to admit exactly that. "I'm sorry, El," he said. "I wish I knew what to say."

"Nothing to say," said El. She wasn't angry or sad. Just defeated. Resigned to the fact.

"But you know what?" Mike said. "I don't care if you're different. I don't care what you have to do about this. None of that matters to me because I know you. I mean, think about it. Would you even be asking these questions if that wasn't true? I bet that half this planet doesn't even stop to think to ask who they are and *none* of us can do what you do. So no matter what happens, I'm going to be right here. I don't care about the rest."

El leaned her head against him and smiled gently. "I'll be right here too," she said. "Love."

Neither of them had any answers for what was going to come in the future. They knew whatever happened would be monumental and shape their lives forever. They were afraid and outmatched, and all they had was their friends and each other.

And that was enough.

As the hours went by, and they fell asleep leaning on each other, El slept peacefully, barely moving, finally managing to rest after the horrors of the day. She only had one short dream that night, but it

was one she would remember with a smile in the morning and in the days to come.

In the dream, she was laying in a park next to Mike. They were older and taller, dressed differently, and sounded differently. Mike was pointing at a cloud and she was laughing.

When she awoke, she cried, but only for a little. Mike didn't see, which was good, because she didn't want to worry him. She wasn't sad. She was happy to have a little bit of joy, no matter how brief.

She knew it wouldn't last forever and she knew just how quickly it could all be gone.

11. Chapter 11: The Enemy

(A/N: El's dream in this chapter was one of my favorite scenes to write. Again, apologies for the slow down in writing. There will at the very least always be a chapter a week. Thank you for reading and reviewing!)

El started high school the next week. Part of her couldn't believe it was happening. It was something that she had thought about for such a long time, had imagined what it would be like, that it almost didn't feel real.

Hopper dropped her off that day, mumbling something about how no one should have to ride those deathtrap buses unless they had no other choice. When she got out of the car, he gave her an awkward hug and turned around rapidly. She could have sworn there was something in his eye. That must have been why he turned around so quickly, right?

The school was massive on the outside and reminded her greatly of Hawkins lab. That had two effects. First, it scared her. She did not need any reminders of her time in that place. On the other hand, she had survived there, so she didn't see why she wouldn't be able to survive this as well.

That all changed as soon as she entered the building. Any hope she had of surviving vanished in the blink of an eye and she began to think that she had made a terrible mistake. There were hallways and rooms *everywhere*, along with kids her age and older, each wearing backpacks and each moving somewhere with a very distinct purpose. How in the world was she supposed to figure out how to navigate all this craziness? It didn't seem possible! Mike did this every single day? How did he manage it all? He was the one with actual super powers it seemed like... managing to make it through this every day was unimaginable!

"Jane... Hopper?" an adult male voice asked.

El looked to the side where the voice was coming from, alarmed. The man standing there was wearing a shirt and tie, and he looked very

important.

"Yes?" she asked, feeling frightened and not being able to explain why.

"I'm your new principal. I wanted to welcome you to Hawkins High. Feeling a little overwhelmed?"

She nodded and the principal smiled.

"I can understand. I remember my first time coming in here, when I was interviewing for the job. I felt the same way. 'No way can I work in a place like this.' But you eventually get used to it. Why don't I show you to your homeroom and help you get situated?"

El smiled. If everyone was going to be this helpful, maybe it wouldn't be so bad after all.

...

Everyone was not that helpful. El supposed that she should have seen it coming, but as soon as the principal left her in her homeroom alone with a group of other kids that El had never seen before, the whispering started. A group of the other kids who were all sitting together, were whispering and looking in El's direction, but trying not to let her see that they were looking.

El tried to ignore them, but found it a little difficult when their whispers started to get louder and louder and some of them started to giggle. She knew they were talking about her and she was not pleased. *If they knew what I could do to them...*

But she wouldn't. She wouldn't do it because she had promised Hopper that she wouldn't use her powers unless it was a matter of life and death, and though she was not pleased to see a group of her peers talking about her and laughing when she was only sitting on the other side of the room, it certainly wasn't going to kill her.

"Hey, you."

El directed her attention away from the girls to see that Max had wandered into the homeroom. "Oh!" said El. "You're in here?"

Max grinned. "Not exactly. But I convinced guidance to let me act as your guide for the first few days because you wouldn't know anyone. So here I am!"

El was grateful. She looked over at the girls who were still whispering, but had quieted down their laughing. "Are they always like them?"

Max took a look and wrinkled her nose. "Ugh. Yes. I know a few of them. Total mouth-breathers. Stay away from them, okay? And don't listen to anything they say. They're a bunch of idiots."

El laughed. Max always knew how to make her feel better—and more confident.

Her laughter was interrupted by a shrill bell sound that commanded attention. El looked up and around, trying to determine where the overly loud sound was coming from. Max shook her head. "That's just the period bell. It lets you know when you need to be somewhere. You basically have to beat the bell to class. It's stupid but that's how they make sure where we're supposed to be. You'll be fine," she added, when she saw that El was starting to look worried again.

"So many rules," said El.

"Yeah," said Max. "Tell me about it. That's just what adults like to do, I guess."

She slid into the desk next to El, who was now checking out the rest of the classroom. It looked very much like what she had expected, similar to the classrooms from Mike's middle school, only bigger. The teacher was sitting at her desk, writing something in a notebook. She hadn't looked up since El had walked in. El wondered if the teacher even knew there were kids in the room. It didn't seem like she did.

...

The school day started not long after and Max helped El find her first class. El was wildly nervous at this point, having seen the way some of the other girls had reacted to her. She hadn't expected to make a ton of friends right off the bat, but she had hoped that things would

have gone at least a little better than that.

Her first class was science, which El was not looking forward to. She had far too many negative experiences that were directly related to science related things. She had tried explaining this to Max, but Max had told her that was a good reason to try to learn more about it. She said that one way to overcome something you are afraid of is to teach yourself more about it so that it didn't seem like so much of a mystery anymore.

Strangely, the teacher barely seemed to acknowledge that El was even there. In fact, El wasn't sure that the teacher had noticed there was a new student in the classroom. Or if there were any students in the classroom for that matter. El was beginning to wonder why adults took school so seriously if the teachers themselves didn't really care.

The rest of the day felt the same, all the way up until lunch. She hadn't seen Mike or any of her friends besides Max all day, and she was starting to feel a little discouraged by how invisible she seemed to be. The teachers were barely acknowledging her and the other kids were treating her like there was something wrong with her.

At lunch though, that changed. She walked in and saw her group of friends sitting together at a table. Mike waved her over and her heart soared. Finally! She sat next to him and kissed him on the cheek, not caring who was looking. Let them look!

"Having a good day?" Dustin asked her.

She shrugged. "Seem like no one cares," she said.

"That's 'cause they don't," said Lucas. "First rule of high school—no one cares, especially the teachers. They're just here to get a paycheck or something. I don't even know."

"Well, I heard a rumor," said Max, "that half the boys in the school are already looking at you."

Mike looked up in alarm. "What? What do you mean by that?"

"You're not the only one who noticed how good looking your girlfriend is," said Max. "You better watch out, Wheeler."

Mike looked shocked and afraid. It took El a moment to figure out what he was so worried for, but when she did, she had to laugh. "I don't care about them!" she said.

"You might..." mumbled Mike.

She pushed him gently. "Don't be silly. They're all mouth-breathers." She took his hand and held it on the table.

Max pretended to gag. El stuck her tongue out at Max and winked.

"School isn't exactly the most fun," said Mike. "That's just the way it is, I guess. But all things considered, high school really isn't that bad. At least it's so big that no one is paying attention to us. It means we don't have to worry about the same sort of crap that we had to deal with in middle school. You regretting being here yet?" he asked El.

She shook her head. At first, she had thought that maybe school was a mistake—it felt like everything they were teaching her she could have just read in a book. But then she realized something—that if she wanted to lead a regular life, this was what it was like. Sometimes you were invisible. Sometimes it was boring. And sometimes you just didn't want to be there. She decided to embrace the normalcy.

...

The rest of the day passed in a relatively uneventful manner. She had two classes with Mike, one of which had the entire party in it, which was a huge stroke of luck. At least there would be some friendly faces to look forward to at the end of the day. Part of her couldn't believe that she was back in Hawkins, able to stay and to live her life free like a regular person.

Though with the death of all of the Russians, she supposed she shouldn't be too surprised. What else was there for her to hide from? Brenner already knew where she was and the Watcher seemed like it could track her anywhere it wanted. Hiding was pointless.

She left the school with her backpack and books, heading outside to wait for Hopper to pick her up. Mike and everyone else was going to need to take the bus, but Hopper had told her for the first few days

she didn't need to worry about that. She understood—there were going to be times when he just wasn't available to get her, but he wanted her first experience to be as simplified as possible.

As she walked down the hill from the school to the parking lot behind the school, she watched the other students running and laughing. She wondered when she would be able to live an easy and carefree life like they did. She wondered if she would *ever* be able to live a life like that. Sometimes it just seemed like it wasn't for her. Like it would never actually get here.

"Hey, new kid," she heard a voice from off to the side, coming from one of the small side alleys that were behind the school.

El looked and saw a group of girls leaning on the building, looking like every movie's cliché of the "cool kids."

"Hi," El said, fully intending on walking right past, even though she didn't see Hopper's car at the bottom of the hill yet.

"You don't want to stay and hang out?" the clear leader of the group asked, with a smile on her face that El did not like. The girl was wearing jeans and a t-shirt that was just a little bit too small. Her hair was blonde and massively curled. She looked just about as different from El as it was possible to look.

"Thanks," said El. "My dad is waiting for me."

The girls stepped a little out of the alley, the leader in front. "Your dad? Oh, I thought you didn't have a dad. That was my mistake."

El was confused. "I have a dad. Chief Hopper."

"You don't have a real dad," said the girl. "Or are you too stupid to know that?"

El took a step backward, not fully understanding what was going on. She hadn't done anything to these girls, so why were they talking to her like that?

"What's your problem?" asked El, not feeling so much angry as confused.

"I'll tell you what our problem is," the blonde girl said. "Stay away from us. No little orphan girl is going to walk into *our* school and start grabbing the boys' attention just because she's new. You're not even pretty. You're just some weird new thing that'll be out of style in a week."

El blinked. "I have a boyfriend."

"So you're a slut, too? Good to know. I don't want to see you talking to anyone besides your weird friends and your ugly geek boyfriend."

Now El was beginning to get angry. The things the girl was saying about Hopper were painful, to be sure, but El knew on the inside that the comments weren't true. Talking bad about Mike though... that was a different story. El thought about how easy it would be to just reach out with her mind and send the girl flying backwards. And no one would ever have a clue.

But she had promised Hopper she wouldn't use her powers unless it was a life or death scenario. And she didn't want to break her promise to her dad on the first day of school.

On the other hand, there were a few promises that she hadn't made at all.

She took a step towards the girls. "Don't talk about him like that."

The girl laughed. "I don't even know who he is, but I'm sure if he's dating you, he's got to be one sad sack of loser."

El had heard enough. She didn't feel like saying anything else, nor did she feel like listening to the girl for a moment longer.

"Ooh, does the new girl think she's tough?"

El didn't even blink. She just stomped right up to the girl and threw a punch—only she pulled it short just inches away from connecting with the girls' face.

The girl cringed backwards, almost falling over with how fast she tried to move away from El. El just smirked. "I don't even know who you are," El said. "Leave me alone." She turned and started walking

away from the group of girls, who were staring at her with a mix of anger and shock.

"You're going to regret that!" the girl shouted, trying to recover some face.

El didn't even turn around to look.

...

When she got in Hopper's car, he was looking at her with a strange expression on his face. She looked at him innocently. "What is it?" she asked.

"How was your day?" he said, but it was clear he was trying very hard to not say something else instead.

"Long," she said honestly. "So much to do. The school is so big!"

"Did you get to see your friends at least?"

"I did. Max helped me around. It wasn't so bad." She stopped and thought. "Thanks for letting me go... dad."

Hopper looked at her and smiled, and she could have sworn she saw a glint of something in his eye. "I hate to bring this up, kid, but what exactly was going on up on the hill?"

Crap. El had hoped he wouldn't have seen it. It sounded like he hadn't seen all of it, but he had seen enough to know that something had happened.

"Nothing," she said.

"C'mon," Hopper said as he put the car in drive and pulled out of the lot. "We both know that's not true. I'm not mad at you, I just want to know what's going on. No secrets, remember?"

El thought about it for a second and decided that Hopper was right. If she wanted him to be honest with her, she would need to do the same thing for him.

"Some girl was making fun of me," she started.

"Son of a bitch," growled Hopper. "What is wrong with people?"

"Wait," El said. "I didn't care though. I don't care what people say about me. But she started talking about Mike. And my friends. So I pretended like I was going to hit her. I didn't hit her, I just acted like I would."

Hopper grimaced. "I want to tell you that I'm proud of you, but at the same time I know I'm supposed to tell you to not do things like that. Why don't we call it even and I'll say, 'Try not to throw any real punches.'"

El grinned. "Sounds good." She paused and then said, "Thank you."

"For what?" Hopper was confused.

"For helping me. For so many things."

"Kid, you don't need to thank me for anything. I should be thanking you for not giving up on me. And I know I'm not gonna be perfect, but we can just keep working on it, what do you say?"

El thought that sounded better than anything she could imagine.

...

"You almost got in a fight with Tiffany Meyer? Over *me*?" Mike couldn't believe what El was telling him. "That's like... the most dangerous thing ever. She basically runs our class, you know that, right?"

El shrugged. "I know that. I just don't care."

"Well you should care! She could make your life a living hell!"

"Mike," said El. "She doesn't scare me."

Mike stopped and thought for a moment. "I guess there isn't too much that can happen anymore that scares you, is there?"

"Not people like her. Not bullies."

Mike smiled and shook his head. "I guess she should be scared of you. Thanks for doing that, El. You didn't have to."

"You don't mind?" El asked. "Me standing up for you?" There had been a brief moment where she had feared that Mike might feel insecure to have his girlfriend be standing up for him.

Mike laughed. "I wouldn't have stood up to Tiffany Meyer on my own in a thousand years. I don't mind at all that my girlfriend is a badass."

"You're the best," said El happily.

Mike shrugged. "I really didn't do anything. I mean, you're the hero here."

El knew that was technically true, but it didn't change the way she felt. There were a lot of things that she had to think about that most girls her age didn't. Mike did an amazing job of handling all of it, so much so that she had started to wonder if he even needed to try.

"Just be careful, alright?" Mike said. "I'd really rather not hear that my girlfriend has detention and got suspended for fighting on her second day of school."

"I'll do my best," said El, rolling her eyes. "But she wouldn't even know what hit her."

"That's what I'm worried about," groaned Mike. "No powers!"

"Fists are okay?" El said mischievously.

"No! Fists are not okay!"

...

That night, the dreams came back. El knew they were dreams as soon as they started, it was never a question. That didn't make them any less terrifying to her because she was beginning to discover that the dreams that had been tormenting her could very easily become reality.

The Watcher was connected to her somehow. The older El got and the more experience she obtained, the more she came to realize that her powers had come about due to some connection to the Upside Down. In many cases, it was incredibly helpful. The problem was that the connection went both ways. If she was connected to it, then it was connected to her. Prior to the Watcher, this connection had never really come back to hurt her. Billy had sensed it and the Mind Flayer had used it briefly, but aside from that, it had never been an issue.

The Watcher was something else entirely.

The vision started out the same as the rest. The world, so much like the one that she was used to, but covered in a layer of ash. El had done some reading on her own after the first vision, trying to find out what could cause something like that to affect the world in such a way.

Nuclear.

El couldn't imagine a world that had been destroyed by nuclear war, mostly because it was such an overwhelmingly large concept that she had no frame of reference for. That being said, everything that she read about that happening made it sound like the visions she was having.

El was standing in the middle of a street, though it was one that she did not recognize. The sky was so thick with ash that it appeared white instead of blue and it looked like the entire thing was covered in a heavy, dense fog.

She took a step forward and found that she was having trouble moving easily; the same feeling she sometimes had in her nightmares, where she was back in Hawkins lab, back being tested by Brenner and the other scientists there.

There was no sound, just like the last time she had been here. It was like after a snowfall, when the snow absorbed any sound being made and it filled El with uneasiness. She had never liked silence, especially when she had come to associate it with the sensory deprivation that was necessary for her to go deep into trances to

better use her powers.

But despite her intense dislike of the silence that was now all-pervasive, she couldn't bring herself to make a sound. It was like her mouth was glued shut and her vocal cords had been removed. She stumbled down the street, making her way to the sidewalk, where the houses were. Everything was overgrown, vaguely resembling the Upside Down. She approached one of the houses and peered in the window, then recoiled violently from what she saw on the inside.

Human corpses, a family of them, scattered on the living floor. Still wearing clothing, but mostly decayed, covered by fungus and rot, they presented a horrifying sight. El tried to scream, but nothing came out.

She started to run. She knew that her legs were moving properly; she knew that she should have been moving so much faster than she actually was, but it was like no progress was being made at all. The houses were still there, the sky was still there, and behind her, the bodies were still there.

I need to wake up, I need to wake up, this isn't real, it can't be real!

Mike would wake her up soon and she would be free from this hell; she wouldn't have to be here anymore...

"El?"

She stopped sprinting and turned her head to the side to see who had just said her name—

Oh God. Mike.

Mike was sitting on the ground, leaning up against a white picket fence, a fence that looked like it had once been another color before it had been covered in a thick layer of ash. Mike's clothing was ripped and shredded and he was...

Older. Much older. As old as their parents were. In fact, he looked almost nothing like Mike did now, but she knew it was him without a doubt.

"Oh God, El. Where were you? How could you let this happen?"

El felt herself trembling. "I... I'm sorry! I don't know what happened! I didn't mean..."

"It doesn't matter what you meant," said Mike, his head hanging, staring at the ground. "Look what happened."

"I don't understand what happened," said El. "What is all this?"

"Can't you see?" said Mike. "You ended the world."

Every word that came out of his mouth took her breath away. It was the most painful thing she had ever experienced, to look into the eyes of someone she loved so much and listen to such terrible things about her.

Mike's eyes were the same as they had always been, except now they were darker, staring right through her with an accusatory glare. His clothes were up-scale, far nicer than anything El had ever see him wear. A suit, torn and dirty, covered in bloodstains. He was tall and lanky, just like he was now, and his face held the same seriousness that she had come to know and love so well.

"I didn't," she said, desperate to hear anything else. "I couldn't have. Please!"

"You can't change the facts, El," Mike said bitterly. "Look at what you did."

And she looked around, taking in the horrors of the world around her. She saw that there were no trees, no bushes, even the grass was a dead color. The only living things were the vines and unearthly growths that had started to cover everything. How could she have done this? It wasn't real. It was a trick of the Watcher. It was—

She looked back to Mike and this time, she screamed.

He was dead, his head slumped forward, blood trailing out of his ears and nose, two small streams of blood coming out of his eyes. "Nononono, please, Mike, no," the words were pouring out of her mouth without thought, her stomach heaving. Even in a vision, she

couldn't watch him die, she couldn't.

She ran to the body, but there was nothing she could do. She took his adult hand in hers and marveled at the fact that his hand seemed no bigger than hers did. She looked down at herself only to find that she too was not the same young girl that she had been not too long ago.

This isn't now. This hasn't happened yet. This may never happen.

It was the only thought that was keeping her from losing her mind entirely.

She stood up from Mike's body, filled with a resolve that had not been there only one moment prior. She looked to the sky and opened her mouth. "I know you're there! And I'm not afraid of you! You show me things that never happened and expect me to just run and hide? I will never run from you. You will never be free, do you hear me?"

Her voice. Her voice was different. Older. Even the way she spoke sounded different. The words she chose, the way her sentences sounded. This was what happened to her when she grew up...

Then the ash and the white in the sky began to part and El could see something descending from above. At first the shape was indistinct and hazy, and she couldn't make out what it was. It grew closer and closer and El could make out shadowy appendages, far too many of them bending and stretching in ways that nothing was meant to bend.

And she saw eyes. Millions and millions of eyes.

The shape in the sky was bigger than skyscrapers, bigger than anything that El had ever seen in her life. It was different than what she had seen with Hopper in the other world when she had rescued him. It was alive; it was moving. It was watching her.

This is what you do to the world. This is what happens when you fulfill your destiny.

El backed away, first one step, then another. Then she turned and began to run as fast as she could, the world no longer feeling like a dream.

I can't do this.

...

When El awoke the next morning, her sheets were drenched in sweat and her head was aching. She knew he needed to go to school but could barely bring herself to get out of bed. She could hear Hopper bustling around the kitchen, no doubt preparing a breakfast for her, which brought a hint of a smile to her face. He really did care, even if she tried to act like he was still the same tough cop as always. He wasn't fooling anyone, least of all her.

She was terrified. Terrified of what might come next, terrified of causing the future that she saw in her dreams. It was becoming harder and harder to tell what was real and what was just a vision brought on by a psychic attack by the Watcher.

She knew what was happening. As more portals opened, the Watcher's power continued to grow. The more powerful it became, the easier it was for it to affect her and the world around her. El wondered if it was possible that at some point, the entity would be able to control her actions entirely, leading to the future that she wanted so desperately to avoid.

What made matters worse was that she was loathe to tell anyone of what she had been seeing. It was one thing to let someone know you needed help, but it was another entirely to admit that you might be the cause for a nuclear apocalypse, complete with an Elder God walking the earth.

Mike would understand—but how could she tell him that she had seen him die, and that it had been her fault? She could tell Hopper—but then that would cause him to worry about her more than ever before and she didn't want that either.

The longer this went on, the more sure she was that she would need to go to the final confrontation on her own. She only hoped that she was going to be brave enough to do it. The fate of everything was riding on it.

She dressed for school in a numb haze. It was hard to concentrate on

something as pointless seeming as school when there was a whole world out there that was actively trying to kill her. In a weird way, things had been simpler when all they had worried about was how they were going to find Will. She felt selfish even thinking that, but the thought was true. There was so much now—an entire new reality that was just outside the Upside Down, a reality composed of a massive, malevolent entity that wanted to use her... to end the world.

"Feeling okay?" Hopper asked when she got downstairs.

She thought for a moment that he had somehow known about her dream and was testing her to see if she would tell the truth. But then she reminded herself that it was Hopper and that he would never do anything like that. He liked to be straightforward. He liked to tell the truth.

"I'm okay," she lied, hating herself for it, but not knowing what else to do. "Another busy day."

"From now until the end of your life," Hopper joked, putting a plate in front of her. "I'm no chef but I know how to make waffles. Enjoy, kid."

Her heart warmed at the thought of Hopper getting up early to do this for her, just so she could have a good start to her day. "Thank you," she said, genuinely meaning it. "So nice."

"Don't tell anyone," grunted Hopper. "I have a reputation to keep up."

El mimed locking her lips and throwing away the key. Hopper nodded in approval. "Good. You learn fast."

...

She spent most of the day unable to think about anything other than her dream and what the future might bring. Mike even noticed that she was distracted at lunch, but she had offered no answers of reasons as to why she seemed that way. She couldn't stop remembering what Mike had looked like. Or what she had sounded like.

The future was not something that she had ever given too much

thought about. She had never had the luxury of being able to—the vast majority of her life had been spent in what was more or less a prison cell. Even after that, everything that had happened to her had forced her to focus on an overwhelmingly short-term lifestyle. Now was the first time that she was being confronted with the possibility of the future, and it was not a future that she wanted to have to think about.

At the same time, was it just a hallucination? Just because she saw it in her head didn't mean it was true. The Watcher's reach was long, and its power levels were unknown. It could have easily implanted that vision into her head.

On the other hand, imagining her and Mike together in the future made her smile. The idea that they could be together for so long was not one she had ever actively thought about before. Could life be that good for such a long time? It was not something that she was used to. It was something she may never even have a chance to get used to, if everything ended before then.

And there was a part of her mind that was telling her it would be better if she was far away from Mike, because then she couldn't accidentally hurt him or cause him any more trouble than what she had already done...

No. She couldn't do that. She had tried that long ago, and all it had led to was suffering for the both of them. No, she would stick this out until the end and then see what needed to be done.

El wondered what it was like to be a normal teenager, to not have to worry about the potential end of the world hinging on your very existence. It sounded boring, but also very nice.

...

Hopper was tired. He wanted to go home and be with El. He wanted to forget that any of this had ever come to Hawkins. He wanted to *leave* Hawkins (but only sometimes) because this craziness could not possibly be happening elsewhere in the country. It was *Indiana*. If you couldn't be safe in Indiana, where could you be safe?

The murders had stopped—or if they had continued, he wasn't finding any further evidence of it. At this point, he would not have been surprised to find a mass grave full of mutilated corpses built underneath a giant altar to some mystical god.

The fact that he legitimately needed to consider that terrified him. What was the world coming to? How was he supposed to raise a kid like this?

To make matters worse, the press was hounding him now. It wasn't that Hawkins newspaper was top quality, but word of the murders had leaked out since the country was paying more attention to Hawkins after the Starcourt incident had caused more than a few raised eyebrows. It was the last thing the town needed right now. Fortunately, Hopper had experience fending off even seasoned press members thanks to his time as a detective. He would need to put those skills to use for the new week or so, until the news cycle died down and people started paying attention to someone else.

Hopper stared out the window at the police station and wondered what El was doing. He hoped she was okay. He knew she had seemed off this morning but hadn't known why. It could have just been school, but something told him that there was something else going on in her head. Something far more serious than a simple test or a little bit of bullying.

He sighed. For all of his skills and knowledge, he felt useless sometimes. So much of the fight was on El now. He wondered if this was how all parents felt as their kids were growing up. He couldn't even imagine what it would have been like to raise El from birth.

Or if Sara was still here.

He wondered if Sara and El would have been friends, then shook his head and drove the thought away. There was no point in indulging in "what-ifs." If his life hadn't gone the way it did, he never would have met El in the first place. Never would have found Joyce again. He didn't believe everything happened for a reason—no, he'd seen too much death for that. But maybe part of him was finding a way to see good in everything... or at least all the good his life had begun to bring him.

12. Chapter 12: The Disappearance

(A/N: We're coming to the beginning of the end. Thanks for sticking around for so long and thank you for all the reviews!)

Hopper cursed and slammed his foot onto the accelerator, not caring who was watching or if he was breaking any speed limits, which he was sure that he currently was. He couldn't be late for this, there was just too much riding on it.

How does this always happen to me?

It was those stupid Brenner murders, they were taking up all his time and drawing way too much attention to the department, which meant he had way more going on then he was used to. That wouldn't be that much of an issue, it wasn't like he wasn't willing to do his job, it was just he had somewhere he needed to be *right now* and stupid inquiries about questions he couldn't possibly answer were not going to keep him from his destination.

He was meeting Joyce for a date, the first decent time that they were going to be able to spend together in a little over a week and he was damned if he was going to be late for any reason at all.

It wasn't that she was going to be angry at him, he just didn't want to disappoint her. He wanted to prove to her and to himself that he could be reliable.

Maybe she would be able to help him figure out what was going on with El. She had helped him before when Mike and El had been giving him such a headache (or at least she had tried to help). Hopefully this time, things would go differently. Hopper was more mature and intelligent now—or at least he liked to think he was. Whether it was true or not was a different story.

He sped into the parking lot of the restaurant where he was meeting Joyce, pumping the brakes hard and sliding into a spot. He jumped out of the car and jogged to the door, adjusting his hair as he went.

He burst through the door, then reminded himself where he was and

came to a stop. Didn't need to make himself look like anymore of an idiot than he already did. "Uh, table for two under the name Hopper?" he said to the man standing by the counter, feeling like a fool.

The man, who was dressed to the nines, glanced at some papers on the counter. "Ah, yes. The lady seems to be waiting for you already. Right this way."

Of course she's already waiting for me, thought Hopper. *I'm late. Damn.*

As the host escorted Hopper to his seat, Hopper considered all the possible excuses he could use for why he was late. It took him only a moment to realize that using an excuse would be the worst possible thing to do. He needed to tell her the truth.

He saw her and smiled. She looked fantastic, as she always did. He slid into the seat across from her and brushed his hair down with his hands one last time. "Joyce, I'm so sorry—"

"I don't need an excuse, Hop," she said. "You're here now."

"No excuses," he said. "Honest truth. I got held up by reporters in regards to all the deaths and disappearances. This place is turning into the media's goldmine and I'm doing everything I can to make sure that doesn't happen. I'm sorry I'm late. I did my best to get here as fast as I could."

Joyce paused for a moment before responding and he was afraid that she was just going to tell him to get out. Instead, she smiled and nodded. "Don't worry about it. I know how the press can be. Remember Bauman?"

Hopper snorted. "You mean bald eagle?"

Joyce covered her mouth with one hand. "That's not very nice—"

"Yeah, well, neither is he. I think I'm allowed that one."

Joyce laughed and Hopper knew that all was forgiven—or better yet, that there had never been a problem in the first place. She trusted him now and he was giving her more reasons for that trust.

...

The night went even better than he had expected. She seemed to have forgotten his lateness almost immediately and there were no more interruptions for the entire night, which was a rarity in the insane lives that they so regularly lived. Throughout the date, they had talked about nothing of importance, which was just fine with Hopper. He didn't need constant life threatening topics to be coming up and interrupting his life. On the other hand, there was one thing he wanted to pick her brain about...

"Joyce, I sort of need your advice."

"You sort of need my advice? Or do you *really* need it?"

Hopper rolled his eyes. "Yeah, I definitely need your advice."

"What about, Chief?"

Hopper took a breath. "El. I know there's something on her mind... something other than the obvious. And it's not like I'm mad at her for it, God knows that girl deserves some peace. It's not Mike, because frankly, I don't mind him as much as I used to. But there's something. She's quieter than ever; she smiles less. I'm worried about her."

Joyce smiled. "Sounds like a teenager."

"I know," said Hopper. "Believe it or not, I know. But you and I both know all too well that El is anything but a normal teenager. And the things she's dealing with are all the things that a regular teenager is dealing with—except multiplied by ten."

Joyce became more serious. "Hopper, if I'm being honest, it sounds like you have this figured out already. What are you asking me?"

"What am I supposed to do?" said Hopper. "She won't tell me and I can't blame her. I don't think I would tell her either. It's hard for me to be mad at her when I know exactly why she's doing it."

"Welcome to parenting," said Joyce. "I don't think there's much that I can tell you. All you can do is let her know that you're always going to be around if she needs you. And then wait. She'll come to you

when she's ready."

"What if she's never ready? Then what?"

"Then maybe she'll go to someone else. You can't force it out of her. She'll just shut down."

Hopper nodded, hating how helpless he felt.

"I know how you feel," said Joyce. "But that's just the way this kind of thing goes. You're just going to have to learn to deal with it."

Hopper sighed. He knew she was right. She was always right about this sort of thing. That didn't mean he had to like it.

"You know," he said. "I don't think I told you how great you look tonight. You look great."

"Do I?" she asked. "Well, thanks for noticing."

...

"Guys, we need a plan."

Will had broken the uncomfortable silence that had seemed to so often take over the room when the group was together lately. They all looked at him, hoping he would elaborate on what he was saying.

"I mean, we can't just sit here and expect things to solve themselves. You know they won't. In the past, things have just gotten worse until we did something about it. If you guys wouldn't have tried so hard with my mom, I never would have gotten free the first time, you know?"

The group found themselves all nodding, even if they weren't too happy about it. None of them wanted to consider what "doing something" might really mean.

But El knew. El knew what it meant. It terrified her, but she had a duty. "It has to be me," she said.

"Woah," said Mike. "Hold on. It doesn't have to be you. We're here

too."

El gave him a look that displayed that she knew just how ridiculous that statement was. Mike backed down because he knew that she was right.

"What do we know about it?" asked Will. "Well, we know what it calls itself. We know what it wants. And we know that something put it there a long time ago. It said it was in prison, right? You're not born in prison. It's somewhere you go. That means we can put it back there too."

"Can we?" asked Lucas. "Because I don't know that we can. El is powerful as anything, but this is a whole new level. It's basically a god."

"Elder gods' biggest strength is that we can't know them," said El. "They're too alien. But I've seen it. More than once."

"And why is that?" asked Will. "I thought that was weird too. I mean, you shouldn't have been able to look at it without going mad. But you did. And Hopper saw it too, didn't he?"

El nodded. She agreed. It was strange that Hopper had been able to see it at all, let alone comprehend its form without going entirely mad. She had assumed her powers had protected her... but what had protected Hopper?

"Then what?" asked Max. "I don't see how this helps us accomplish anything at all."

Dustin spoke up, but his voice was slow and serious, as if he had been putting serious consideration to his words. "El sealed something away before," he said. "Remember?"

The Demogorgon.

Mike was on in his feet in a second. "Yeah, she did! But do you remember what that almost did to her? Because I do! She almost died. And that's just not acceptable!" He was not going to just stand by while his girlfriend put herself in harm's way yet again. Not like that.

"Mike. I can do it. I have to do it." El's voice was soft. She knew she needed to get him to accept this now because it was not a fight that she was going to want to have later.

"But El... you could die. And we don't even know that you'd be able to seal it away."

"Actually," said Lucas slowly. "I think we do. I think she *is* the key and I think that the Watcher told us that. Why else would it be so desperate to get its hands on her? It must know already. She has the power to mess with the barrier between worlds. For better or worse."

The group sat in silence. Knowing it was one thing, but saying it out loud was something else entirely.

"We need to make a plan," said El. "Even if it ends with me dying."

Mike opened his mouth to speak, but El shook her head. "Can we talk about it later?"

"Can we talk about it now?" said Mike. "I can't just let this—"

Dustin coughed uncomfortably. "Why don't we give you guys some space?"

The party stood up and shuffled out of Mike's basement awkwardly, leaving the couple sitting there, facing each other. They sat in silence for a moment, neither of them wanting to break the silence.

El, surprisingly, went first.

"I know what you mean," she said, speaking quietly. "But, Mike. Look at this. If I can stop it, I have to. It's the right thing to do."

"You don't have to die," said Mike, and his voice broke a little as he said it. It was hard to even imagine something like that happening. "There has to be another way."

El put a hand on his face. "Maybe there is. But there might not be. And if there isn't, I need to be ready."

"I can't just let you—"

El shushed him. "It's my decision. I have to."

"What would Hopper say?"

She hadn't thought about that, and the thought hit her hard. She tried to imagine what would happen to her adopted father if she died. How would he deal with it? Would he be able to deal with it? She was struck with a pang of guilt and for a moment considered that maybe Mike was right. But no...

"What would you do?" she asked him. "What would you do if you could save everyone? If you could save me? And it meant you had to die?"

Mike didn't say anything. As soon as she had said he could save her, he already knew what his answer was. It wasn't fair, but it was the truth.

"You know what you're asking me to do, right?" he said.

She nodded. She had spent so much time thinking about it and she knew that it must have been killing him on the inside. But there was no way away around it.

"It might not happen," she said. "Believe in me."

"I do believe in you. I believe that you're always going to try to do the right thing, even when I don't want you to." Mike shook his head.

"I love you, Mike," said El. "I never want to hurt you. But some things... have to happen."

"What are you going to do?" asked Mike.

El smiled, but the smile was grim, without an ounce of humor. It was the smile of someone who knew how powerful they were. "I'm going to end this."

...

The decision did not take long to make. Joyce decided it was time to come back to Hawkins. She could put the place they had in

Pennsylvania back on the market and find something small here in town. Running away from her problems had never solved anything, and so she was done running. Now that El was with Hopper, it was one less head to worry about (financially at least—Joyce would never stop worrying about El) and that made things more possible.

She'd have to tell the kids, but they wouldn't be angry. They'd be thrilled. She knew all of them had desperately wanted to go back to the place they had considered home for so long, but they hadn't wanted to say anything to her that would make her feel bad about the decision she had made. They were all such good kids and she was so proud of them.

The things Hopper had said about El had stuck in Joyce's head. She understood what Hopper was saying about the girl—she certainly was extraordinary. At the same time, she couldn't help but wonder if Hopper was being just a little bit overprotective. Not that Joyce could blame him, of course—after everything that had happened to Will, Joyce understood the need for any parent to be overprotective. Joyce just wondered how much she needed to be concerned in this case.

Spending time in Hawkins was nice, especially because she had time off, but it was stressful, because Christmas was approaching and her financial situation was shaky at best. The kids would understand, but she didn't want them to have to understand. She wanted to be able to give Will (and even Jonathan, despite the fact that he was older now) the gifts they deserved. She wanted to make it special.

So now she was bustling about downtown, hoping to find a place that desperately needed help, some place where she could start picking up hours and hopefully getting her feet back under her. The sudden move had been hard on her too, and it had been difficult to feel like a stranger in a strange land, even if it was only for a few months.

As she walked down the main street, she noticed that even for a weekday, the sidewalks and the road were oddly empty. Yeah, most people would be at work, but surely she should see... someone? She shrugged and chalked it up to the upheaval that the Starcourt incident had caused. It had put businesses out of business, but there hadn't been enough time for someone or something to fill the void in the meantime.

Joyce idly wondered if she could be the one to fill the void. Maybe starting her own business... that could be an adventure. She shook her head. Impossible. She barely had enough to stay afloat as it was, let alone scrape together the capital she would need to start her own business. Maybe in the future, but for now, she needed to focus on keeping her family happy and safe.

A strange sound caught her attention and made her glance down a small street—more of an alley, really—behind one of the storefronts. Oddly, the store seemed to be closed, leading her to once again wonder where everyone was. Was it some sort of holiday that she just didn't know about?

The sound repeated and she stopped walking, staring down the alley. It was an odd sound, almost like something being torn in half.

"Hello?" she called out down the alley, not really thinking that someone would respond.

As expected, there was no answer.

The sound happened one more time, sending chills down her spine. It was similar to the nails on a chalkboard effect, but not quite so intense. She took a cautious step into the alley, wondering if there was anyone there at all, or more likely, if it was just a piece of metal scraping against something.

She walked down the alley and turned the corner, fully expecting to see nothing at all.

Instead, what she saw made her scream.

...

"Mom still isn't back," said Jonathan, pacing the room. "Which is weird. You know how she is. If there's even a chance of being late, she's sure to let us know, no matter what she has to do."

Will scratched his head. "It doesn't mean anything happened... maybe she's out with... Hopper or something," he said, his voice showing just how he felt about that turn of events.

Jonathan cringed at the thought. "Uh. Yeah, I guess that's possible. It just seems weird to me, that's all."

"Which part? Dating Hopper or not being around."

"Yes," said Jonathan. "Exactly."

Will laughed, but at the same time, he couldn't shake a feeling deep inside that there was something wrong. Jonathan was right—even if it was nothing, their mother always let them know. Even if she needed to find a payphone.

Being back in Hawkins had been great for Will. He had missed his friends and being back had reminded him of all the good times that they had in the past. At the same time, it reminded him of all the bad times as well. He understood why his mother had wanted to leave. He had even agreed with her, on some levels. Being in town though made him remember how much he had done, how much the party had survived. It made him feel strong. It was something that he wasn't used to feeling.

Jonathan had paced away from him, to the other side of the hotel room, staring out the window, still deep in thought. Will knew exactly what Jonathan was thinking about—all the possibilities that could have taken their mother away and made her late. In the past, there could have been a myriad of things. Russians, monsters, the government—who knew?

Now, though, most of those things were out of the picture. And the ones that weren't were trapped in another dimension. There was no way it was something like that. Right? Will tried to relax. There wasn't anything he could do right now anyway. Maybe in a little bit he'd call Hopper. Hopper would know what to do. As much as he didn't like the idea of his mother dating the chief, he knew that Hopper was a good man. He was no Bob Newby, of course, but he would take care of Will and Jonathan's mother. Hopper was dependable.

Will sat down on the bed and pulled a book out of one of his bags. He laid back on the bed and prepared to get lost in a fantasy world. He was getting a little tired of staying in a hotel and as happy as he was

to be in Hawkins, it was a little tiring to not be living in a real home.

He could only hope that his mom would decide to come back and stay. Everything could go back to the way it was and the party could be together again—and as long as they were together, what could possibly stop them?

...

"Slow down," said Dustin. "I can't understand what you're saying. What's going on?"

Will was visibly panicking, his face flushed, his eyes red. He had shown up at their house very late, waking up each of their families in turn. He had refused to tell them what was going on right away, all they knew was that Jonathan had sped away in his car, apparently looking for something or someone with desperation.

"My mom! She didn't come back!"

"Didn't come back from where?" asked Mike. "What's happening?"

"I don't even know," said Will. "She just went out for a little and we thought she'd be back tonight, so we waited, but she never showed up."

"Maybe she's with Hopper and El," said Lucas.

Will shook his head. "I called them! El picked up and I asked if Hopper was there. He got on the phone and said he hadn't seen my mom all night. Something happened to her, I know it. I just know it."

"What could have happened?" asked Max. "She's got to be alright."

"That's what I kept telling myself," said Will. "And then it kept getting later and later and now I just don't know anymore."

The party looked exhausted. It was the dead of night and none of their families had been pleased to be woken up by a doorbell. They had all headed over to Mike's house. The Wheelers hadn't exactly been thrilled, but Jonathan had explained to Mrs. Wheeler that it was an emergency. She had trusted him—ever since Nancy had talked

about how hard a worker Jonathan was and how good he was to her; Mrs. Wheeler had become one of Jonathan's biggest fans.

It had also helped that Chief Hopper had called the house not too long after to explain that he was on his way with El. Mrs. Wheeler had of course asked if everything was okay and he had told her not to worry, and that if he needed anything, he would be sure to tell her. She had told him that the door would be open and that he should make himself at home.

Just then, the door to the basement opened and two sets of footsteps could be heard coming down. The party's heads jerked up to see who it was to find El and Hopper coming down the stairs. Hopper wasn't in his work uniform and El looked like she had just woken up.

"What the hell's going on?" asked Hopper. "Where's Joyce—I mean, where's your mom?"

Will shook his head. "We don't know."

Hopper ran his hand through his hair. "Where's your brother?"

"He went to go check around the town. Any places that she might have gone to. Somewhere she might have ended up."

Hopper looked blankly at Will. "He does realize that's not going to work, right? Where else would she be spending the night?"

Will mumbled something.

"What?"

"I said, we thought maybe she was spending the night with you," Will said, looking at the ground.

Hopper's face turned red and he looked down at his boots. "Uh, yeah. Right. Well, she isn't. I'm going to head to the station and put out a missing persons' report."

"We don't have time for that!" said Will. His voice was growing even more agitated. "She could be in trouble *right now!*"

Hopper raised his hands. "Hey. Listen. I know. I've been doing this for a long time. If we panic, we might as well give up."

Will looked at Hopper like he had two heads. "Don't panic? That's my *mom*."

"And you know what? She didn't panic when you went missing. It might have looked like she was to everyone else, but she knew what she was doing. She was doing *everything* in her power to find you, even when everyone else had given up. That's what we have to do right now." Hopper's voice was calm and even.

"What am I supposed to do?" asked Will.

"What can we do to help?" asked Mike.

Hopper shook his head. "Right now, you need to stay here. Stay safe. Try and get some sleep. All of you need to watch out for each other."

Will nodded, but his expression was blank and the fear he felt was obvious in his eyes.

El put her arm around Will. "We're here," she said. "Together."

"Together," said Will. Then he looked to Hopper. "Find my mom. Please."

...

Hopper pulled out of the Wheeler driveway, tires squealing, hands clenched so tight on the steering wheel that he knuckles were white. He wanted to punch something. He wanted to scream. How was this happening? This *couldn't* be happening.

"*Dammit!*"

All the advice he had given to the kids had been true, he was just finding it a bit hard to follow in the moment. He should have been there; he should have done something!

Even as he thought the words, he knew they were ridiculous. There was nothing he could have done. What was he going to do, follow her

around all day? That wouldn't be fair to her or to him. He shook his head and pressed down further onto the accelerator.

He needed to get in the right mindset. It was strange, because he wasn't usually like this. Hopper had seen a good number of crises over the years, things that had trained him how to react when something like this happened. This time, though, it was different.

It was Joyce.

Was this how she felt when I went missing for all that time?

He tried to tell himself that it was nothing, that he would find her in an hour, maybe less, but he knew that wasn't true. Things like that didn't happen in this town, not anymore. It was just disaster after disaster.

Those poor kids—as if Will hadn't been through enough, the last thing he needed right now was for his mother to go missing.

Hopper wondered if any of this was connected to everything that he had seen with El. He prayed that it wasn't, because that was something so far out of his paygrade that he wouldn't even know where to start.

I can't keep putting this all on the kids. I just can't keep doing that.

He knew how strong they were. He knew what El was capable of—she had rescued him, after all. But that didn't change the fact that they were still kids. Freshmen in high school, kids who should be worried about homework and getting a date, not diving through dimensions and fighting gods.

He pulled into the police station and eased his hands off the wheel. He breathed deeply as he shut off the car, closed his eyes and counted to ten. It was time to do what he did best. It was time to be the Chief.

...

The party didn't know what to do. No one knew what to say to Will other than, "Everything is going to be alright." And that didn't sound

very convincing at all. Instead, they sat there, huddled together, no one saying much of anything at all.

Eventually, El stood up and crossed over to the cassette player that was sitting in the Wheeler's basement and started fiddling with the messy and unorganized stack of cassettes that was sitting haphazardly next to it. The party watched her with curious expressions on their faces, wondering what it was that she could possibly be doing.

After only a minute, she managed to somehow find whatever it was she was looking for, because she slipped it out of the stack and opened up the plastic shell. She popped the cassette into the tape player and the opening notes of David Bowie's "Heroes" started to play.

"Your mom is a hero," said El simply. "She can do anything."

Will smiled at her and for the first time since the hellish evening had begun, the smile looked genuine. "Jonathan really got to you, didn't he?" Will asked.

El nodded and smiled. "The best big brother. Your family is so strong."

"You're my family," said Will. "All of you are. You're the ones who helped get me out of that place. You're the ones who helped me through school. I haven't been alone in years, not really. Because whenever I feel alone, all I have to do is think about you guys. Even now. I'm scared out of my mind, but at least I know I have you guys."

"We're always here for you, buddy," said Dustin. "Just like we know you're always here for us."

And then El had a realization. It was strange, that she hadn't thought of it before. It seemed the most obvious thing in the world, but she had needed Will to mention his time spent in the Upside Down before she could remember it.

She looked at Mike with an expression on her face that said everything she needed to say. He immediately knew what she was

thinking and his face shifted to one of unease.

"I can find her," said El. "I can go look for her."

The part looked at her, realization dawning on their faces as well.

"Is that safe?" asked Lucas. "We don't know where she is or what's happened to her."

El knew that it may not be safe. It could be utterly harmless but Lucas was right—they didn't know where she was. And El couldn't forget what had happened that time she had gone looking for Billy. The way he had looked back at her. Or the times she had become stuck in a vision, trapped in a nightmare version of the future.

"I don't know," she admitted. "But I have to do it."

Will shook his head. "You don't have to. We know what's happened the last few times. I'm not going to make you go through that again."

El was resolute. "You're not making me go through anything. I want to. I owe her so much."

"She wouldn't want you to owe her anything."

"She's my mom too," El said, and that seemed to end any argument that remained. Will knew what he would do for his mother and if he were in El's position, he wouldn't have even had a second thought.

As the last notes of "Heroes" began to fade away, the ritual began in the same way as always. El knelt on the ground, blindfold wrapped around her eyes. Mike painstakingly tuned a radio to a station of pure static, without even a hint of voices or music.

Mike squeezed her hand as she knelt there and whispered in her ear. "I'm going to be right here with you. We all are. No matter what happens, you're never alone."

"Never alone," said El, and her serious face of concentration briefly melted into a smile.

And then it was time to begin.

...

There was blackness. El found the blackness strangely comforting this time, because it was something that she was used to. It was something she had seen so many times and it was something that in her strongest moments, she had even had some sort of control over.

She focused herself on her memory of Joyce Byers, the woman who had helped El be a woman. The mother that El had been deprived of. One of the kindest, strongest people El had ever met. Her memory of Mrs. Byers was so strong, so all-encompassing, that El knew she would have no trouble locating the woman who had become a mother to her.

"Where are you?" she asked, but she asked it with more than words. She asked it with her thoughts, with her mind, with the thing inside her that let her accomplish such wonders. "Where have you gone?"

The blackness began to move around her in a way that she had never seen before. It felt like it was rushing past her, like she was being pushed forward at an unimaginable pace. If there were any real surroundings other than the darkness, she knew that they would have blurred to little more than color as they moved past her at an incredible rate.

She clutched at her head and fell to her knees as her surroundings continued to move faster and faster, until she shut her eyes and cried out.

It came to a stop as suddenly as it had started. She wasn't sure how she knew that it had stopped, since there had been no real feeling of movement, only the illusion of it. But when she opened her eyes, there was no more darkness. There was a landscape.

It was a lush, green landscape, thick with foliage and living greenery. She was standing on dirt, soil that felt like it had rained only a day or so ago, damp but not waterlogged. Everywhere she looked, she saw life—but no animals, only plants. Flowers, tree, shrubbery. The sun was high in the sky, blazing down on her, but the temperature was pleasant.

El turned around, taking in the landscape with intense confusion. Out of every possibility she had considered, this was not one of them. "Hello?" she called out.

The plantlife around her absorbed the sound of her voice, preventing there from being any echo. There was little hope of the sound of her voice traveling far, given the circumstances. Not that it mattered. She wasn't really here—only a projection of herself.

"Is anyone there?"

She stepped forward tentatively, not wanting to disturb the peace and quiet of her surroundings. In the corner of her range of vision, she saw something move slightly and she turned towards it, hoping for any sort of clue as to where she was and why her search for Mrs. Byers had led her here.

There was something dark on the ground, something small that had moved. It was on some leaves that littered the ground, along with some moss. El took another step towards it and bent down to see what it was. After only a second of watching, she recoiled.

The black thing on the ground, whatever it was, was growing and spreading outwards.

It looked like plant rot, some kind of disease that was eating away at the green. She took a step backward and saw that it was continuing to grow, faster now that she had seen it. It was moving towards her, outwards, covering the ground at a steadily increasing pace.

It was far larger now, and she could see clearly what it was doing. It was killing everything, turning the beautiful surroundings into a blackened mockery of what it had once been. She turned then, deciding to run from it—

It was coming at her from the other direction as well. Behind her, she could see the trees were no longer the bright green that they had been only moments ago. Everything was decayed and disintegrating and it was only getting worse.

El closed her eyes, preparing to pull herself out because nothing good

could ever come from this—

Then it was gone.

She opened her eyes and saw the exact thing that she had hoped to not see. It was the other world, the Watcher's prison, in all its alien horror.

Of course Mrs. Byers was here. This was the only place she could have been. This was the place it was always going to end.

You stupid girl. Did you truly believe that there was any other way?

"I'm going to kill you," said El. There was no anger in her voice, no outrage. She was stating a fact in the simplest way possible.

You cannot kill death.

El could see the Watcher on the horizon, looming above everything.

Come and get her, girl. It is time for all of this to end.

When El opened her eyes, she saw her friends staring at her, questions in her eyes. She knew that she should have felt fear, but all she felt was resolve. It was time to put an end to the horror.

13. Chapter 13: The Fallout

"It has her," El said.

"What does?" asked Will, though it was obvious that he already knew.

"The Watcher," said Mike. "That's what has her, isn't it?"

El nodded.

Mike swallowed hard, because he knew what that meant. It meant that she was going to have to confront the entity on her own and that it would likely lead to her not making it back for one reason or another.

"We need to tell Hopper," said Dustin.

Max's face was pale. "What will he be able to do? He's just going to tell us to stay here and stay safe and that's just not an option right now."

"He'll know what to do," said Dustin. "He always knows what to do."

Lucas' expression was one of fear. "If it knew to go after Mrs. Byers, who's to say it doesn't know to go after the rest of our families? It could be taking them *right now*! We need to go!"

El, strangely, didn't feel fear. She knew that she had every reason to feel afraid, but where that fear was, she felt almost nothing. She shook her head. "No. It wants us to be afraid. It wants us to make bad decisions. But it's the one who is afraid right now. It's afraid of me. It's afraid of us, of what we've done. It knows we can hurt it, but only if we're together."

"How can we hurt it?" demanded Lucas. "What can we possibly do? We're a bunch of kids! It's an elder god!"

"Lucas!" Mike shouted. "Snap out of it! You're not thinking! You bombed the *shit* out of the Mind Flayer, we took down the Demogorgon, we survived a literal Russian invasion! Slow down and think!"

Lucas stared at Mike blankly as the words started to sink in. "I... yeah. You're right. I'm sorry, El."

Dustin looked like he had just made a staggering realization. "Guys... uh, what about Brenner? Because if he's still alive..."

El had been thinking about this since their encounter with the returned Brenner. He was bound to try again and they had no idea when it was going to happen. She was beginning to think now though, that Brenner wasn't going to come for her at all. He had already come and taken someone. Now she was going to go to him.

She knew it was a trap. She knew Mrs. Byers was bait. But even though she knew all of that, it didn't change the fact that she was going to go after the woman who had become like a mother to her. There was no choice to make.

"Brenner doesn't need to get me anymore. I'm going to go get him," said El, and the whole party knew what she meant as soon as she said it.

"You know it's a trap, right?" asked Max. "That's what the Watcher wants you to do."

"Doesn't matter. I have to do this," said El. No one argued with her, because they all knew they would do the same thing in her position.

"So what do we do?" asked Mike. He didn't like that it needed to happen, but he knew he needed to support El in whatever her decision was.

"Time to fight back."

...

Hopper had put out the missing persons report and had alerted the rest of the department that this was an all-hands-on-deck emergency. Some of them had not been happy to hear that at this time of night, but he had brooked no argument. He knew some people might accuse him of being biased due to his relationship with Joyce, but he didn't care. This wasn't about him anymore. This was about finding what had happened to one of the most important people in his life.

He left the station shortly after doing everything he needed to so that the proper people would be alerted. Not that he thought it would do any good—at this point he was pretty sure the disappearance was tied to the other world and that monstrosity that he and El had seen. He hoped he was wrong. If that was true, it meant that there would be little he could do to help find Joyce again. The only one who would be able to do anything about it was El. The thought made him sick. His girl, facing off against the type of monster that no one should ever see, even in their nightmares.

Hopper's plan was to continue the investigation by the book. He needed to set up a timeline and retrace Joyce's last steps, which was going to be a problem because no one, not even her kids, knew just where it was she was going before she went missing. There wasn't going to be any witnesses that he could talk to, at least not at first, because he didn't even know where she had gone missing from.

His first stop would be her hotel room. Jonathan wasn't there and he didn't have a warrant, but that didn't bother him. If the hotel was up to the same standard as the rest of Hawkins, a firm hand would be able to open it right up without too much trouble.

If not... he didn't have any issue with breaking the lock. Even the chance of finding something relevant was worth it.

Hopper pulled into the parking lot of the hotel only a few minutes later. He didn't have his lights on and he was trying to not make it apparent that he was in a frenzied rush. Unnecessary attention was not going to make his job any easier.

He knew the hotel room only because he couldn't forget a single detail of the moment when he had seen her for the first time after being rescued by El. The image was clear in his head and the room number was just as clear.

He approached the door, feeling unusually jumpy. It was like he knew someone was watching him, even though he knew that anyone who was watching him was just some out of towners staring out their window as they struggled with insomnia.

The night was warm, unseasonably warm. Hopper felt uncomfortable,

even though he wasn't wearing his work uniform, which despite how long he had been wearing it for, still didn't feel right on his skin. His hand went for his gun, almost without thinking, and he unclipped the holster, allowing him easy access.

I'm not going to need my goddamn gun, what is wrong with me?

But that wasn't true, was it? He had no idea if he was going to need his gun or not, so...

Hopper drew his gun and turned the safety off. After his run-in with the Russian Schwarzenegger, he was never going to be caught off-guard again. Not like there was a human adversary alive who could scare him after his time in the Upside Down, but even so.

He drew close to the door, which was lit poorly by ancient lights that looked like they hadn't been cleaned since the hotel had opened. He glanced around him, hoping that there wasn't going to be a family watching with mouths open, wondering why this strange man was walking towards a hotel room with a gun out. There was no one there, but he didn't notice. His attention had been drawn to one overwhelming fact that caused him to raise his gun and aim it at the door.

The door was open.

Only a crack, but it was enough to set off every alarm in Hopper's head. He stared at the opening in the doorway, trying to turn his head to peer in, to maybe see if there was anything or anyone on the inside. It was an exercise in futility—he could see nothing.

Hopper steeled himself, drew a breath, recalled every second of training and experience he had ever received—

And kicked the door in.

Hopper turned side to side, gun waving across the room, looking for someone, something that might explain the opening of the door. There was nothing visible. His eyes settled on the back of the room, where a small wall jutted out, almost splitting the hotel room in two.

Hopper walked towards it slowly, his gun still raised, ready for

anything.

Ready for anything other than what he saw.

"Did you miss me, Jim?" Brenner was sitting on a small stool at a table.

"You son of a bitch—" Hopper didn't think. He reacted, firing his gun at Brenner, one shot aimed squarely at the man's head.

Brenner raised his hand and the bullet changed direction so subtly that Hopper almost didn't see it happen. If he hadn't known better, he would have thought that he missed—but he knew what had happened. The doctor had moved the bullet with his mind. El was right. He did have powers now.

Brenner sighed. "I thought we had moved past that kind of thing. Now people are going to come investigate, and what do you think I'm going to have to do about that?"

Hopper's fist clenched hard around his gun. "Threatening me will get you nowhere. I heard what happened to you, asshole. You got your face chewed off by one of those things. You think I'm afraid of you? I survived *months* in that hellhole—you couldn't handle a few seconds."

Brenner shook his head, smiling nastily. "You would think that, but then, you were always the simplest of these people. Charming, some might say, but I just find your naivete crass."

"You know what?" said Hopper. "I don't really care. And I think I'm going to—"

But his words were just a ploy to distract Brenner from what he was really doing, which was firing his gun at the least expected moment. It made no difference. Hopper didn't even see Brenner raise his hand this time—one second the white-haired scientist was directly in the bullet's path, and the next, he was several feet to the left.

Hopper felt a cold sweat break out on his forehead as the fearlessness brought on by adrenaline began to fade and he began to realize just how much trouble he was in.

"Where's your bravado now, Chief? I don't hear any childish taunts or threats. Because perhaps you're starting to see just what is occurring here."

Hopper was seeing what was happening and it was terrifying. There was no way he was taking Brenner out—El was the only one who could do that now. His thoughts had shifted from how he was going to win this encounter to how he was going to survive it.

He took a step backwards, edging closer to where he came from. Brenner saw what he was doing and laughed. "And now you think you're just going to walk out of here?"

Hopper gritted his teeth. He wasn't going to get a second chance at this. He had seen Brenner move things via telekinesis, and Hopper knew he had to only hope that Brenner wouldn't be able to just grab Hopper and throw him back into the room.

And just like that, Hopper sprang into action, launching himself for the door, moving as fast as he possibly could.

He was too slow. Brenner collided with him in what must have been a flying tackle, sending the two men skidding along the ground. Hopper struggled to keep hold of his gun, knowing that if Brenner got ahold of it, it was all over. It seemed that Brenner's telekinesis must have been weaker—after his showdown with El, perhaps he had been exhausted in some way. Hopper kicked out, trying to push Brenner off of him, but the man's maniacal grin was only inches away from Hopper's face.

"Time to come with me,"

"I'm not going anywhere, bastard!"

Hopper pulled the gun as far up as he could and pulled the trigger, over and over. The shots were wild, hitting nothing other than the ceiling, but they had the intended effect. The sound of the shots was so loud that it stunned both Hopper and Brenner, who rolled off Hopper to the ground, clutching his head.

Hopper's head was ringing as well, and he struggled to push himself

to his feet.

If you don't get up now, you may never get up again.

He thought of what might happen to El if he went missing as well and pulled himself up on the corner of the bed, propping himself on unsteady feet.

Brenner was already rising as well and Hopper knew this was his last chance. He considered taking another shot, but only for a second. He had seen just how much good that had done the first time and he knew better than to waste the miniscule amount of time he had left.

Hopper stumbled out of the room. He could hear Brenner behind him, shouting something incomprehensible. Hopper's ears were filled with a ringing that drowned out everything else and all he could do was think about how lucky he was to be alive.

As he numbly climbed into his truck, he could see Brenner emerging from the hotel room, stalking menacingly forward. Hopper slammed on the gas and had time to silently reflect as he pulled away:

I think I found out where Joyce went.

...

When the sun rose in the morning, the party groggily woke up in the Wheeler basement. Everyone had fallen asleep just lounging around and they all had the tell-tale soreness and bedhead to prove it. None of them felt ready for the day, let alone everything that was sure to follow it.

El was already worried that Hopper wasn't there yet—she had expected him to be back relatively quickly, because since his return, he had been exceptionally punctual as if to make up for all the times in the past when he had not been quite so concerned with time.

"You okay?" Mike asked her after they woke up.

She nodded groggily despite it not being entirely true. She was nervous. She was worried for Hopper and Joyce. She felt the weight of the world on her shoulders and she wished there was someone

who could take the responsibility away from her even though she knew that this was her destiny.

Destiny.

What a funny word. It was a concept she had never given much thought to, not until Jonathan had started showing her some movies and music. She had started to look at the world in ways that she had never considered before. In a way, it had been a good thing, but at the same time, she realized that thinking about those things could lead her to realizations that she didn't really want to have. Contemplation was hard.

"Kids, is everyone alright?"

Mrs. Wheeler was standing at the top of the stairs, calling down to the kids. Her concern was quite clear in her voice.

"Uh, I think we might be staying home today, mom!" Mike called back up. There was no point trying to explain this disaster. She would never understand. Not that he expected her to—this was utter madness.

"Well... okay," Mrs. Wheeler said. "If you need anything, just let me know. And Chief Hopper called. He sounded like he wasn't feeling too well, but he said he was on his way back."

El shot up from under the blanket she had been using. All she had needed to hear was that Hopper was on his way back. Maybe he had learned something. Maybe he had uncovered some clue. She looked across the room at Will, who was now sitting in the same upright position.

"Didn't feel too well?" El asked, quietly, looking at Mike in confusion.

Mike shrugged. "Sometimes she doesn't make a lot of sense," he replied. He was used to his mom saying things that he didn't entirely understand.

El looked around nervously, trying to imagine what that meant.

"Oh..." Mrs. Wheeler turned away and a few seconds later, a heavy

knocking at the door could be heard. "That might be him now. I'll let him in. You come up when you're ready, okay?"

El scrambled out of bed and rushed to the stairs, not about to be put off from seeing her dad for anything. Mike looked at the rest of the party, shrugged, and got up, following her up the stairs.

...

Hopper looked like he had been through a small war or at the very least, a large battle. His clothing was disheveled, his face was slightly bruised, and he was limping. El gave him a massive hug that turned into a more restrained hug when she saw him wince.

"What happened?" she asked.

Hopper glanced uneasily at Mrs. Wheeler who conspicuously turned away and ducked out the room, clearly aware of the fact that her presence was not needed at the moment.

"Kid, please don't freak out," said Hopper. "But I think I know what happened to Joyce."

"The Watcher has her," said El miserably. "I looked and I saw and now I have to go get her back."

Hopper stepped back from El, his eyes wide. "You what? Okay, I don't even know why I'm surprised at this point, but you have got to stop taking risks like that."

"I'm the only one who can do it," said El, feeling the same old stubbornness returning. Why couldn't the adults ever see what was right in front of them the whole time?

Hopper stopped speaking and looked like he was concentrating hard. Then he closed his eyes and sighed. "Yeah. Yeah, you're right. But next time, do you think we could maybe talk about it first? Just so I know what's going to be happening, okay?"

El let her anger die down before it could even grow strong. She nodded and smiled. "I think I can do that." Then she looked confused. "But what happened to you?"

Hopper looked down at his shirt and rubbed his temples. "Right. Yeah. I... uh, well, I got into a bit of a fight."

"With who?"

"Brenner. Son of a bitch is—I mean, I didn't just say that. That jerk is back and you weren't kidding about the powers. He wanted to take me too because he wants to make sure you come over into the other world. It's a trap. You know that, right?"

El nodded because of course she knew. Just because she was a kid didn't mean she was also an idiot. "But I can't just leave her there, can I?"

Hopper looked at the girl who had become his daughter, the girl who had rescued him and accomplished so much in such a short time. He thought about everything she had gone through, and how she had changed from a girl who was more or less mute into the brave, strong, intelligent person that was standing in front of him.

"Remember when everyone thought you were a Russian spy?" Hopper said with a snort. "I mean, of all the bullshit lies."

El laughed. "I can't even speak Russian!"

"Yeah, but you used to talk a whole lot less." He ruffled her hair and then stopped, looking embarrassed. "I guess what I'm trying to say is... I'm real proud of you. More proud than I've been of anything in my life for a long time. I know I can't take too much credit for it, but even if there's just one thing... that's more than I ever hoped to have."

"You taught me how to be me," said El. "You taught me how to survive."

"Kid, you were born knowing how to survive. You're the strongest person I know."

"You taught me to never be stupid."

Hopper had to wipe something out of his eye, but it couldn't be a tear. "Why don't we get your friends and talk about this?"

"You want to know what they're all thinking?" El asked.

Hopper shrugged. "I have no idea what's going on anymore. And they only people that seem to have even the slightest clue are your guys. So yeah, I want to know what they're thinking. I want to know whatever crazy plans you've come up with. I want this taken care of once and for all."

...

"No! Absolutely not! That is out of the question and I will not allow it!" Hopper bellowed at the kids, who were now all seated at the police station.

El was more confused than frustrated. "But I thought you said you wanted to hear our plan?"

"I did!" said Hopper. "Oh, I did. But I did not want to hear a suicide mission, which is exactly what you just described. No! We are not engaging in a plan that does not have an end goal beyond 'hope that I can get back out alive.'"

El wanted to yell back at him, but part of her felt like he was right. There had to be something they were missing.

"Chief, I mean, with all due respect," said Mike. "I think we should trust her."

Hopper looked at Mike with outrage. El looked at Mike with confusion.

"Are you kidding me? I would have thought that at least you would have been on my side. You know that if she does this, there's a damn good chance she'll never make it back."

Mike nodded. "Yeah. I know. And I hate it. I've been trying to convince her to change her mind for a long time. But what I realized is that she's not going to. She's going to do what she thinks is best. And the truth is that she's the only hope we really have anymore. The Watcher keeps getting stronger and stronger."

"And if we wait too long... it's going to come out," said Max.

Dustin said, "And that would be really bad."

Hopper rolled his eyes. "Yes. That would be really bad. Thank you for the shockingly in-depth analysis. I know that it would be really bad. I saw it with my own eyes, remember? It almost killed me. It almost killed both of us. So don't tell me how bad it would be."

El wanted to yell at Hopper, but she couldn't bring herself to because she understood his feelings perfectly. He was scared, and frankly, so was she. That didn't change the fact that this needed to be done and it could only be done by her.

Hopper breathed in and exhaled. His face was red and he looked furious. "I am never going to be okay with this."

"Do you trust me?" asked El. She wasn't trying to trap him. She was genuinely asking him that question and whatever his answer was, she would understand.

Hopper sighed. "Yeah, kid, I do. But you know what? I love you, too. And I can't lose you. Not when we just found each other again." He looked hastily at the other kids and ducked his head, embarrassed to be displaying such emotion in front of so many other people.

El beamed at him. "I love you, dad."

Hopper scratched his head and turned partly to the side. "Can we talk about what it is you think you need to do?"

El furrowed her brow. "I need to close the portals. All of them. At once."

Hopper sat down heavily in his desk chair. "I just don't understand why you all think that she can do that. I mean, I'll never doubt all the power you have, but I just don't think that's something reasonable for anyone to do. This thing is basically a god, right? And it's tearing open holes across the town, probably across the globe. And you're going to close all of them?"

Mike spoke up, but his voice was subdued. "Because the Watcher wants her so badly. It's scared of her and it needs her to finish opening all the portals necessary for it to come through. That's why it

took Mrs. Byers. It needs to make sure that she goes after it."

"You're betting all of this on a hunch that you made about the behavior of a god?" Hopper asked. "I see your reasoning, but that seems like a dangerous way to think. What if that's what it wants you to think?"

"We tried thinking of something else," said Lucas. "But what else is there? Just wait for it to come through?"

"Hang on," said Hopper. "If it can get through on its own, why does it need you? All it has to do is wait, right? What if you just never went near it again?"

El nodded. "Won't work. Think about it. It's already having such a huge effect on people. Most of us have seen it or felt it. I can't let that happen."

Hopper groaned. "I would be so much more annoyed if I didn't completely understand how you felt. And I know that I would feel the same way. Damn it, kid. Why do you have to be so good?"

"I learned from the best."

"I am not the best. And I wouldn't exactly call myself good either. You can't keep using me as an excuse for all your vices, you know that?"

The rest of the party was looking at each other and smiling, trying not to laugh. The only one who didn't seem to be enjoying in the humor of watching Hopper attempt to deal with feelings was Will, who was understandably looking quite worried. El noticed this and cleared her throat. "What do you say?"

Hopper paused. He knew what this meant—it meant that if something went wrong, if anything went wrong at all, he may never see the girl who had become his daughter ever again. The thought pained him to even think about, but he couldn't deny the logic in what the kids were saying to him.

"I have to go through one of the portals," said El. "I have to go through, and I have to face it. I'll distract it long enough for Mrs.

Byers to come back through, and then I'll collapse the portals. Just like a did with the Demogorgon."

"There's only one problem with that plan," said Hopper. "And by that, I mean, there's a lot of problems. If you collapse the portals, how are you getting back? And how do you plan on collapsing that many portals at once?"

El had been wondering that same thing herself but had made a realization not too long ago. "I don't have to close all the portals. I have to sever the connection. The connection between our world and the Upside Down. I had already done it, twice, but both times I didn't know."

Will's face showed that he was making the same realization. "When you sent the Demogorgon away and when you closed the Mind Flayer's connection, right?"

El nodded. "I almost did it the second time, but I didn't know what I was doing. Not really. This time I won't stop—it all has to be closed."

"That doesn't explain how you're getting back," said Hopper. "I've been there and I will not leave you there. No one is getting left behind, not for any reason."

"I'll find my way back," said El. "Part of me will always be here."

Hopper shook his head. "That's not good enough. I can't leave that up to the chance of you finding something that might work."

"We don't have a choice!" said El, and deep down, Hopper knew she was right.

He cursed under his breath and turned away from the kids, who were all watching him with bated breath.

"Can you give El and I some time to ourselves?" Hopper asked, staring vacantly out the window behind him.

The party nodded silently and shuffled out of the room, heads down, all feeling very awkward.

Hopper sighed heavily. "Can you sit?"

El hesitated, but then saw Hopper's slumped posture and she decided to do as he asked. She sat down in one of the chairs. Hopper turned around and smiled at her, but it was a sad smile, not the big jolly one that she had grown to know and love.

"I'm not going to argue with you about this for much longer," said Hopper. "I promise. I know why you want to do it and I know why you need to do it. I don't even think you're wrong. I would do the same thing if I had the power to and I want you to know just how proud of you I am. It's just that if you get trapped over there. Or if something, anything happens over there, I couldn't live with myself knowing that I let you walk over there."

"But you know that I have to," said El. "For Mrs. Byers. For the world."

"I know. And I want you to know that I love you like you were my own daughter and that I believe if anyone has the power to fix this mess, it's you. It's always been you. Ever since this started, it's been you. You're the key to all of this. You've been the key to so much. To me. To the town. And now to the whole world."

"I'm going to come back," said El. "I promise."

...

Hopper wasn't going to leave that to chance. He didn't have much time—he knew how El worked and he knew that she was going to put the plan into action as fast as she could. That meant he needed to learn as much as he could about how to help her—if that was even possible. His first stop was going to be the library, but then he reconsidered. It would take too long and there was no guarantee that any of the information he found was even going to be accurate.

Then he had another idea. He would ask Mike. All he had to make sure was that El wasn't there when he showed up to talk to Mike about it. It was ironic—Hopper showing up at Mike's doorstep, asking him for vital information. The nature of the joke was not lost on Hopper. Just a few months ago, he would have rather died than

consider asking *Mike Wheeler*, of all people, for any sort of help.

Things had changed, though. First of all, Hopper *had* almost died. The experience had changed him, had caused him to realize some important things about the way he looked at the world. Hopper stared at his desk, trying to imagine a time when life wasn't like this.

What he imagined was far worse.

Yeah, it was true that his life was now far more complicated than it had ever been. But before this, before it had all started, his life was far from something he was happy with. At the time, he might not have noticed it. Now, though, with El and Joyce and all the other good things that had come into his life, he finally felt... happy. He was content with where he was. And he was not going to just let that all fall apart because he didn't want to talk to his daughter's boyfriend.

Hopper was being confronted with the real chance that he may not see El again. Even if she was successful—especially if she was successful—it seemed unlikely that she would be able to make it back to their world. He knew that she thought he wouldn't be able to help her, but he was the chief.

It was time to start making preparations. He would need more than his standard issue handgun. He had a few pieces at home, and there were some heavier guns in the station. They had never been use, as far as he could tell, but he knew where they were kept in case of emergency. This was definitely an emergency.

How much help could he be? He didn't know the answer to that, but he assumed it wasn't much. There was just no way he could let El face this on her own. Not when he knew just what she was going to be walking into.

...

"He's going to try to come with me," said El.

Mike nodded. "I think we all guessed that. You don't want him to?"

El shook her head. "I don't know if I can do what I need to if someone

else is there."

Will looked more worried than ever. "Whatever we do, we need to do it fast. My mom is still in there!" Everyone understood his concern and no one took his words too harshly. Jonathan had spent the night driving around and had only stopped into the police station after Mrs. Wheeler had said where the kids had gone. He had been distraught, which had only increased after learning where his mother really was. Will had convinced Jonathan to go back to the hotel and grab some sleep, though how much Jonathan would really be able to rest was up in the air.

El put her hand on his shoulder. "I'm going to get her back."

Will looked miserable. "It's just that when I went missing, she did everything that she could to get me back. I can't do anything except sit here and wait. And when you do go and get her back, we're just going to be sitting here waiting, aren't we?"

Then El had a realization. She couldn't defeat the Watcher that quickly. It would be a confrontation unlike any she had ever imagined and she had no idea what was going to happen. But there may be something that she could do to get Mrs. Byers back before that final battle.

Her realization must have shown on her face, because Lucas looked at her sharply and asked, "What is it?"

"I think I know how I can get her back," said El. "I just have to give it what it wants."

"What does it want?" asked Dustin, even though the answer was obvious.

"Me."

"No!" said Mike. "You're not going to sacrifice yourself like that! Not if there are other options!"

El smiled. "I'm not just going to give myself up. But if I talked to it. Told it that I would come, but only if it let her go."

"You'd be walking into a trap," said Mike.

"I know," said El.

And then there was nothing left to say at all.

...

Mike had so much he wanted to say, but El wouldn't let him say any of it. She kept insisting that she was going to be back soon and that there was no point. She wasn't even going to be going through a portal, so there was nothing to be worried about.

He was worried anyway. It was what he did. There was no part of this that was normal and he didn't know how to deal with any of it.

He watched as she sat down and closed her eyes, the static already playing from the radio. She would be back soon, he knew she would. That didn't make him feel any less nervous. Their conversation with Hopper had reminded him just how much he could lose. How much El could lose. He wasn't prepared to lose any of that.

For once, he felt like he understood Hopper better than ever. There was a connection there now, something that had only been animosity prior. Mike hoped that the new facet to their relationship would stay.

El's shoulders settled and Mike knew that her mind had gone to the place that it always went to whenever she did this. He hoped that she would find what she needed and that Mrs. Byers would be back with them soon.

It was time to begin.

14. Chapter 14: The Bargain

El saw where she had gone to, and trembled. Knowing that she was going to open her eyes in this hellhole was one thing, but actually seeing it was another. The Watcher was nowhere in sight yet, but she knew without a doubt that it was already examining her with those countless cold, dead eyes.

"I want to talk," she said, not bothering to raise her voice. She didn't even look around at the landscape. She already knew what she would see.

There is nothing to talk about.

The voice rumbled in her mind and she shivered.

Why have you not come here in body? Is it possible that you are possessed by too much fear?

"I'll come to you," she said. "But only if you let Mrs. Byers go first." She had rehearsed the words over and over in her head, but now that they were coming out of her mouth, they sounded weak and ineffectual.

And why would I ever do something like that? There seemed to be almost a hint of humor in the voice—was it mocking her?

"Because if you don't, I won't come to you," said El. "I'll never use my powers again. And then what?"

There was silence, and she wondered if the Watcher was even going to respond. But then it did, and she knew that her words had created the desired effect.

You know that your world would still fall. Your cooperation is desired, but not needed.

"I don't think that's true," said El. "I think you can break free without me, but you can't unite the worlds. Can you?"

More silence, and El knew that she had succeeded in striking a nerve.

How do I know that you will uphold your part?

"Because I don't lie," said El. "If you've been watching me for so long, you must know that's true."

Her surroundings began to shift around her, and the blasted landscape of the other world morphed and twisted, and she knew that she was being transported somewhere else. She wondered again who or what had the power to create a place like this, the power to trap something as terrible as the Watcher in a prison the size of an entire world.

Moments later, she stood in the same alien landscape, the same strange twisted spires all around her that had been there the first time she had been here with Hopper. This time though, her adoptive father was not with her. Instead, Mrs. Byers was standing there, looking around wildly, as if not understanding how she had gotten to where she was.

"Where are we?" she gasped out, spinning around. "El? How did you get here?"

"It's okay," said El. "I'm here now."

"I don't understand," said Mrs. Byers, who was clearly panicking. "I was just in Hawkins... what's happening?"

The Watcher rose over on the horizon and El could see its massive bulk, covered in eyes. Mrs. Byers stepped backwards, staring at the monstrosity in fear.

Go then. The voice boomed once again into El's head. Go, but be warned. If you do not uphold your end of the bargain, there will consequences of the like you have never before imagined. This is inevitable. I am inevitable. And all will return to the way it was intended to be.

Mrs. Byers reached out for El, but El's body was insubstantial and the hand passed right through her. El smiled, attempting to calm Will's mother. "I'll see you soon," said El. "I love you."

"What did you do?" asked Mrs. Byers, trembling. "What did you

promise that thing?"

El tried to respond, but she was out of time. The world was fading away quickly and she knew she was about to return to where she had come from.

"You're safe now," said El, trying to reassure Mrs. Byers. But then the world was gone, replaced only by the blackness that she had come to know so well.

...

El ripped the blindfold off and stood up, heaving for breath. The party was watching her expectantly, waiting for her to tell them what had just happened. For her part, she was looking around, wondering where Mrs. Byers was—if the Watcher had kept its word, than it should have let her go.

"What happened?" asked Will, his eyes wide and expectant.

El took a second to catch her breath before responding. "It agreed. It said it would give her back, but it didn't say how or where. All I have to do is agree to meet it. Physically. In its own world."

Mike restrained himself from saying anything, because he knew whatever he said was only going to be full of panic and fear.

"And then you're going to seal it away," said Max.

El nodded. No one said what they were all thinking—that if she failed to seal it away, anything could happen. And whatever happened was likely to be world-ending in its ramifications.

"We should tell Hopper," said Lucas. "He'll know what to do next."

"I don't think there is anything we can do next," said Dustin. "Now we just have to wait until it's time."

Painfully, what Dustin said was true. There was no way of knowing when things would progress forward until the Watcher made itself clear. Now, the only thing they had to do was find where Joyce was—if in fact she had been sent back by the Watcher.

...

Hopper nearly crashed his truck as he drove down Main Street. The reason was clear and he didn't feel like it was too much of his own fault. There was someone standing—staggering, more like—in the middle of the road. Hopper pulled his truck over and jumped out.

"Jesus, you okay? You're going to get yourself killed," he said as he approached the figure, who had just slowly made it to the other side safely.

When he saw who the stumbling figure was, Hopper almost fell over.

"Joyce?"

He didn't understand what she was doing here or how she could have even gotten to the middle of the road. The kids had told him that she was in the other world, taken captive by the Watcher. There was no way she had wandered back here unless—

El must have done something. He gritted his teeth together and tried to not get angry. He could only pray that this didn't mean something had happened to El or that she had somehow gone missing or been taken by the Watcher in exchange. In the few seconds it took him to approach Joyce, his mind ran through a hundred different worst case scenarios. None of them made him feel any better.

He put his arm around her shoulder. "We're going to get you out of here, okay?"

She clearly recognized it was him, but she was coherent. If she was saying something, which it seemed she was, he couldn't make out what it was. His brain could make a few jumps though—El had obviously done something to get Joyce back. Joyce's return had not gone smoothly, and she was dazed and confused.

Hopper ushered her to the truck, trying to warm her up and get some kind of response out of her that he could make sense of.

"... it's everywhere, it's too big, it's too much..."

Hopper helped Joyce into the seat.

"Joyce, I want to help you, but you're not making any sense right now." He climbed into the driver's seat, preparing to take her back to his place. "You're in shock. Can you hear me?"

Joyce looked at him numbly, and her next words made perfect sense. "How did Will survive for so long?"

"Because he had you for a mother. You taught him how to do things like that. It was you."

Joyce looked at Hopper and he thought that he saw a hint of recognition in her eyes—that she was regaining some sort of lucidity.

"Can you hear me?" he repeated. "Are you okay?" He spoke slowly, but firmly.

Joyce's eyes cleared. "Hop... I..."

"It's okay," said Hopper. "I found you. What's going on?"

Joyce shuddered and then spent the next few minutes telling Hopper what happened. The truth was that she didn't remember anything up until the exact moment when El appeared in the other world. It had been a blur—a literal blur of madness and chaos that had turned her mind into a jumbled mess.

"Is El okay?" Hopper asked next. "Where is she now?"

Joyce shook her head. "She didn't say. We... we didn't have a lot of time. But she made a deal with that... thing, whatever it was. She said that she would go meet it, on its own terms, as long as it let me go."

Hopper cursed silently.

"What was it?" Joyce asked. "How can something like that exist? And El... what is she doing?"

Hopper sighed as he started the car. "She's doing what we taught her to do. She's being brave and strong and she's doing what she thinks is right."

"You're just letting her—?"

"I'm not letting her do anything," said Hopper. "Believe me, I fought her every step of the way, because I don't want to see anything happen to her anymore than you do. But sometimes you gotta let your kids grow up. You have to let them make decisions. Especially when that decision is the right one. The only one."

"She's going to fight that thing on her own?"

Hopper's mouth twisted into a grim smile. "Not if I can help it. She'd never let me or anyone else go with her, because she thinks we can't handle it. Maybe she's right. But I'm her dad now and I can't let her go there alone. I just can't."

Joyce slumped back in her seat. "The world is literally ending, Hop. What are we going to do?"

"The world is always ending," said Hop. "We just have to stop it one more time."

...

The world may have been ending, but it wasn't ending on a schedule that made sense to the party. A few of them, maybe even most of them, had thought that the final showdown was going to happen in the next day, even the next week. But it didn't.

Nothing happened. The world kept moving. The sun kept rising and falling. The kids had to go back to school, because even Hopper couldn't come up with an excuse convincing enough to cause all their parents to continue to allow them to stay away.

El didn't mind. She liked the distraction, of having to work on something that wasn't the literal apocalypse. It kept her mind off the fact that her life could be over so very dangerously soon, something that she had come to accept but still tried to avoid keeping on her mind more than necessary.

This was made easier by one simple fact—Christmas was approaching. The town of Hawkins, oblivious to the doom that was hanging not only over their heads, but also all of existence, was

entering into full Christmas mode. The decorations were starting to go up and the music was starting to play. It filled El with a cheer that she wasn't quite used to yet.

The concept of a holiday was still kind of strange to her. She had learned so much, but some things about culture still confused her. Who created these special days? Why did people still celebrate them? But she made sure not to ask too many questions. She was just happy to be able to spend so much time with her friends and family, things that she had never expected to have back during all the time she spent in Hawkins lab.

As for her and Mike, they tried to not talk about the future too much more than necessary. Both of them just wanted to enjoy whatever time they had left with each other, because they both knew it might not be that much.

"So what are you going to get Mike for Christmas?" Max asked one day when the party was sitting at lunch. Mike had gotten up and walked away from the table, leaving the perfect opportunity for Max to ask the question.

El looked at Max in alarm. It wasn't something that she had given any thought to. On top of that, she didn't exactly have a limitless supply of money to buy whatever she wanted to get for Mike. Or any money, for that matter. Turned out being a test subject didn't quite fill your bank account.

"I don't know," she said, her nervousness clearly showing. "What should I do?"

Max laughed. "I can't tell you that! That's something only you can do."

"But I don't know how to do that!"

Max shrugged. "You might know better than you think. Remember when we went shopping? It's kind of like that, only this time you're doing it for someone else. You have to think about what he would like instead of what you would like."

But their conversation was cut short because Mike was already returning to the table. El sighed as he sat down and he looked at her.

"What's up?"

Her eyes were wide as she tried to lie and said, "Nothing! I mean, we were just talking. About homework. You know."

Mike raised an eyebrow. "Uh, okay, I guess." He was pretty sure that he was being lied to, but he wasn't going to pursue it.

He rejoined the conversation, but El could tell there was something on his mind. She didn't think it was something bad, but he was quiet and it looked like he kept wanting to say something. Finally, after a few minutes went by, he brought it up.

"So the Winter formal is coming up," said Mike. "Are we going to go?"

El had heard about it, but hadn't thought too much about it, for a lot of reasons. Primarily, the future was scaring her, but also the idea of the dance was a little frightening to her. The Snow Ball in eighth grade had been one thing, but this was different. It was high school and there were going to be so many people there and she didn't even know most of them, and more than a few of them didn't even like her...

She hadn't been thinking about her encounter with those angry girls, but now the moment popped back into her head. Some of her emotions must have shown on her face because Mike was looking at her weirdly.

"You don't have to go," said Mike quickly. "It's not that big of a deal."

Max patted El on the shoulder. "She's just thinking about all those strangers. And probably what you're going to look like in a formal outfit. You know how she looks at you."

Mike blushed a little and tried to play off the comment. El grinned at his discomfort.

"We should go," said El. "It would be fun."

The guys in the party looked at each other and sighed. Lucas said, "I mean... Max, do you want to go?" It was pretty clear that he didn't want to and he was hoping that his girlfriend would back him up.

"Yeah," said Max. "As a matter of fact, I do. So what do you have to say about that?"

Lucas didn't have anything to say about that at all.

Dustin shrugged. "I'll go. I mean, Suzie won't be there, but what the hell? I'll have fun with you guys either way."

Max grinned devilishly. "But Mike and Lucas aren't off the hook yet. You both know that you have to come up with some creative way of asking us, right?"

Lucas and Mike looked at each other and groaned. "No we don't," said Mike, looking at El nervously.

"How the tables have turned," said Max.

"I don't have to ask you in a creative way," said Mike to El. "Right?"

El stole a glance at Max, who nodded encouragingly.

"Yes," said El. "You do."

"Oh, hell."

...

"And then she told me that I have to ask her in a creative way!" moaned Mike. "How the hell am I supposed to do that?"

Nancy was trying hard to not start laughing and was instead holding herself to an ironic smile. "That's not the worst thing that has ever happened," said Nancy. "And you're a smart kid. And you really care about her. You'll think of something good. I'm sure of it."

"That doesn't help at all," said Mike. "I was hoping that you'd have some sort of advice for me."

"Well, why didn't you say so?" asked Nancy, grinning.

"Not helping!" said Mike. "Come on!"

Nancy rolled her eyes. "I'm not just going to tell you what to do. I can help you, but you have to do that on your own."

Mike sighed. "I hate this! Being in a relationship is hard. Is it always like this?"

Nancy gave Mike a look. "Do you *remember* the Steve and Jonathan mess?"

"Oh yeah," said Mike. "I guess it is."

He sat down on the floor of Nancy's room, leaning his back against her bed. She was sitting on her bed, looking at some magazine.

"It's worth it," said Nancy. "Yeah, things seem hard, but you'll see. And after you come up with the perfect idea, it'll be amazing. For you and for her."

"I guess," said Mike. "I just always suck at this kind of thing."

Nancy closed her magazine. "I used to think I was great at it, but then I realized that I had done a pretty good job of screwing up everything I stuck my nose in. Maybe none of us are good at it. Maybe that's what growing up means—realizing that you're kind of shit at everything and then deciding to do the best you can anyway."

"You're not shit at everything," said Mike. "I mean, you just helped me. A lot."

"I guess I did," said Nancy. "How have things been between you two?"

Mike stopped to think before answering. Truthfully, things had been good, but there had been a cloud hanging over them, for obvious reasons. It had been getting in the way of them being able to really enjoy themselves. Maybe the Winter formal was the chance they needed to get things back on track, even if only for a little while.

"I think we need this," Mike said. "We need this to go right. Because

who knows what's going to happen next?"

Nancy nodded, understanding just what Mike was talking about. "I can't tell you what's going to happen," she said. "But I think that whatever happens, the two of you are going to make the best of it. You're both incredible—I don't think I've told you that enough. But it's true."

Mike smiled at his sister. There had been plenty moments of awkwardness and sibling rivalry between them throughout their lives, but deep down, they both cared about each other very much. "Thanks, Nancy," he said. "I guess I better go start thinking about the formal."

Nancy winked. "Yeah, I guess you better."

...

Mike never got phone calls at school. His parents never had anything *that* important to tell him, and it wasn't like there were any emergencies in his life that didn't involve the party, who was always at school with him.

So when the classroom phone rang and his teacher picked up, Mike didn't think of anything other than how happy he was to have even a small break from school work. But only a few seconds later, the teacher held the phone away from her face and said, "Wheeler, phone for you."

Mike looked up from his desk in surprise. "Uh... okay?"

The rest of the class was looking at him with curiosity. Typically, Mike was the quiet one, that no one looked at or paid attention to. So him getting a phone call in the middle of the day seemed pretty out of the blue to most of the kids who barely even knew his name.

Mike crossed the classroom and took the phone from the teacher's hand, stepping out into the hallway for some privacy. "Hello?" he said into the phone.

"Hey, kid," said Hopper, on the other end.

Mike blinked, confused as to why the chief was calling him at school. "Uh... hi, Chief. Is everything okay?"

"I mean, for now," said Hopper. "But I couldn't think of another way to talk to you without El finding out."

Mike supposed that made sense, but he still didn't understand why Hopper wanted to talk to him in secret. "So what's going on?"

"I know what El is planning on doing, but you understand that I can't let her do that on her own."

Mike nodded. "You know I agree with that, but what are we supposed to do? We can't just force her to take us with her."

Hopper snorted. "Kid, you don't want to go with her. Trust me. But there is something we can do. We can work together."

Mike blinked. "Sorry, I could have sworn you just suggested we work together."

"That's because I did say that."

"I don't understand," said Mike. "Why would you want to work with me, of all people?" He knew that Hopper had started to look at him a little differently, maybe even approvingly, but that was a far cry from wanting to team up with him.

"Because I trust that you want the best for her too, even if you're too young and don't know how bad this thing can get."

Mike wanted to argue, but he knew that Hopper wasn't wrong. Mike *was* young and he hadn't seen even a fraction of the things that Hopper had. So instead of arguing, he just said, "What can I do to help?"

"That's the spirit, kid. The answer is simple. I just need you to tell me whatever she's planning. If she's planning on going in, I need to know. Whatever she tells you, I need you to tell me."

Mike knew this was a good idea, but the thought of it still made him feel uneasy. He'd be lying to El and sneaking around behind her back

was something he had learned awhile ago was just not a good idea.

Hopper must have understood the silence, because he continued. "I get it. You don't want to spy on her. You want to let her make her own decisions. And I do too. But if there is *anything* I can do to help her, anything I can do to give her even the tiniest bit of help, you know I'm going to do it. Whatever it takes."

Mike nodded slowly. "But if she finds out..."

"If she finds out," said Hopper, "I will take the fall. It was my fault. My idea. I made you do it. I can live with that."

"Yeah," said Mike. "Okay. I'll tell you whatever you need to know."

"Thanks, kid. Now get back to class, because I am not going to be responsible for truancy too."

Mike snorted. "Thanks, Chief."

"Everything is gonna be alright, kid."

When Mike reentered class, no one was looking at him anymore. They had stopped caring about the strange quiet kid who had left the room for a phone call. And he was just fine with that. There was only one opinion that he cared about, and she wasn't in the room right now.

...

Hopper breathed a sigh of relief as he hung up the phone. He hadn't really thought that Mike would turn him down, but he knew that the kid would have had every reason to. It was a huge demand to put on anyone, especially after the way Hopper had treated the kid, not too long ago. If someone had asked, he never would have admitted it, but he was a little ashamed of what he had done. He understood why he did it, and it wasn't like what he did was that out of character for him, but maybe that said more about his character than anything else.

His time spent in the Upside Down had changed him—he realized that. All the promises he had made to himself when he had been

there were promises that he had kept. He had changed the way he treated everyone, including himself. It had repaired his relationship with El, with the rest of the kids. It had strengthened his bond with Joyce.

It just seemed so impossible that it could be all going away so soon. El had helped him heal from wounds that had happened far too long ago. Losing her now... what would happen?

He realized he knew the answer. It was different this time. He wasn't the man that he used to be, he was someone stronger. Someone who had learned from his mistakes. If, God forbid, he did lose El, he wouldn't let himself fall apart. He had a support system now. He had newfound purpose and respect for himself and for other people.

There were still times when Hopper thought about his daughter. His family from before, the life that had come before. But it was different. It didn't happen in the way it used to, when the pain would tear the breath out of his throat so badly that he would need to drown himself in pills and alcohol for days to make it go away.

All the changes that had happened to him had made him a better person, but he'd be damned if having conscience didn't make life infinitely more difficult. There had been moments when he had wished that he could go back to the careless way he had existed before. There had been so little to think about or to worry about. But then, maybe this was what living was like.

Hopper stared out the window by his desk for a moment. The station had been on his back for the past few days, and the reason was obvious. The investigation of the murders had ceased, and everyone wanted to know why. Hopper couldn't tell them the reason they had stopped was because he had found the killer—a deranged, possessed scientist that was supposed to have been dead. That was being controlled by a god from a different dimension.

The press attention had decreased once the bodies stopped showing up, but the last thing Hopper wanted was some nut picking up on the threads and pulling. It would just lead to questions he couldn't answer. He knew that the Department of Energy people were working on covering things up as best they could, but that was a lot of bodies

in a very short period of time.

He rose from his desk. The world was changing, and he was tired of it. He hoped against hope that whatever was going to happen could wait until after Christmas. He wanted to give El the best Christmas that had ever happened. She deserved it. She deserved so much more than he could ever give to her, and it killed him that he didn't know how to do that.

"Something up, boss?" Callahan asked, looking up from his desk.

Hopper shook his head. "No. At least, I don't think so. Just gonna head out for a little, okay?"

"Anything we can help with?"

"Pretty sure I'm so far beyond help that you're wasting your breath even asking," said Hopper. "But I appreciate the offer."

Powell looked up with a grin. "How's the lady friend, Chief?"

Hopper raised a stern finger. "Now you're overstepping. I don't ask you about what you do in your spare time, do I?"

Powell grinned. "Just making conversation."

"Well go make conversation about something else," said Hopper. "I'm heading out."

Callahan shrugged. "Just give us a shout if you need anything."

Hopper rolled his eyes as he walked out of the room. "The day I need help from you guys," he muttered, "is going to be a sad day for this town."

...

Hopper had a specific destination in mind. He knew exactly where he was going, and it did, in fact, have to do with his lady friend, not that he would ever admit that to his co-workers. He was going to see Joyce, though it was more than just a social call. He was worried about her.

She was tough, and there wasn't anything he thought she couldn't handle. She had faced the ridicule of the entire town and faced hell itself in an attempt to get her son back, never giving up, even when she was the only one who still believed.

That being said, there were only so many things a person could go through and walk out of unscathed. That was especially true when they didn't even know what it was that she had gone through. There were multiple days of missing memories inside Joyce's head, something that filled Hopper with unease. The last time a Byers had gone missing and had returned... it had not gone exceedingly well. He trusted her, of course, but he didn't trust whatever the Watcher may have done to her.

He knocked on the hotel door, wondering what her plan was for the future. The door opened only a moment later, revealing an exhausted looking Joyce. "Hop?" she said, confused. "What are you doing here?"

"Came here to check on you," he said. "How are you feeling?"

"A little hungover, to be honest," Joyce said. "Can you come in? Do you have some time?"

"Nothing but time," said Hopper, stepping inside. "I've been trying to kill any investigation into those murders now that we know Brenner was behind it."

Joyce shook her head. "I can't believe that animal is still alive. You haven't seen him since he attacked you?"

Hopper shrugged. "I don't see what reason he would have to go after us now. El gave her word that she would go back, so—"

Joyce shuddered. "I can't believe she's just going back over there."

Hopper considered not telling Joyce of the deal that he had struck with Mike regarding El. He knew that she would disapprove of keeping more secrets from El, but surely she would understand, given the circumstances. Right?

No, he had to tell her. There were more than enough secrets being kept here, and he didn't want to add yet another one to the pile. "The

plan is that she won't be there alone," he said. "Wheeler is keeping me up to date. If she gets any funny ideas, I'll know about it. I'm going to do whatever I can to make sure that she doesn't go through this alone."

Joyce looked like she was going to chastise him for lying to El, but then she bit her tongue. "You know," she said, "that doesn't make me feel much better. Now I can lose both of you at the same time. Great. I did that once, Hop. I can't do it again."

"We don't need to think about that right now," said Hopper, sitting down at the table in the hotel room. "How are you feeling? What's been on your mind?"

Joyce's face was a little frustrated with the way Hopper had blown off something that was so clearly important to her, but she elected to ignore it. "I've been better. But I've also been thinking."

"Should I be worried?" joked Hopper.

"Only if you're looking forward to me leaving," said Joyce. "Because I've decided it's time for us to come back to Hawkins."

Hopper looked surprised, then his face broke into a wide grin. "That's the best news I could have heard right now. What changed your mind?"

"When the murders stopped," said Joyce, looking pointedly at something on the bedside table behind Hopper.

He turned around, confused as to what she meant. Then he saw a police scanner sitting there. It didn't take him long to put the pieces together.

"You were listening in because I wasn't telling you what was going on," he said, feeling embarrassed. After everything she had done for him, after everything they had been through, and he still couldn't bring himself to tell her all of the facts, all of the time.

Joyce raised an eyebrow. "I was wondering when you were going to figure that out. You weren't surprised when I didn't have any reaction to the news that bodies were turning up left and right?"

"I just didn't want to give you anything else to worry about," said Hopper. "You've got enough going on."

"You really think that handing me secrets is going to reduce the amount of worrying I do?" asked Joyce. "You know me better than that."

"Yeah. I guess I do."

"And if this is going to work, you need to know that I expect you to tell me things like that."

Hopper raised an eyebrow. "In my defense, it was an active investigation. I shouldn't have been going around telling anyone about it. It still *is*, come to think of it."

"Oh come on, the two of us are so far beyond things like that," said Joyce, and Hopper had to agree.

"Look, I am always going to do what I think is best," said Hopper. "I think you know that. I know that about you. I'm not always going to make the right call, but I'm always going to try. I don't *want* to keep things from you, and I'd rather just tell you everything. Make life a whole lot easier. But you know me and you know that's not a promise I want to make to you when—let's face it—the fate of the world could damn well depend on me keeping secrets. Who knows anymore?"

"I wish I could yell at you and tell you that answer is a bad cop-out, but it's really not," Joyce sighed.

"I'm going to do my best," said Hopper. "That's all I can do."

"In any case," said Joyce. "We're coming back. I'm not sure what I'll have to do to work this all out, but it'll happen."

"You sure?" asked Hopper. "I don't think anyone would blame you if you and your family wanted to go somewhere very far away. A lot happened here to you and I can tell you that I wouldn't want to relive it."

"We just have to move on," said Joyce. "That's part of trauma. Coming to terms with it."

"Always trying to teach me something," said Hopper. "I'd be annoyed if I didn't need it so badly. How do we move on from this? When this is all over, what are we supposed to do?" He didn't add, *if we all make it out alive*. That went without saying, and it wasn't a thought he wanted to vocalize anyway.

"Same way we do anything," said Joyce. "One day at a time."

The hours continued to fly by as the two sat and talked, and Joyce stood up and put some coffee on. For Hopper, it was never too late in the day to enjoy a cup of coffee, and returning from the Upside Down had not gotten rid of his caffeine addiction. If anything, it might have even sharpened it.

Maybe she was right. Maybe they could just take it all one day at a time, and it would all work itself out. He didn't truly believe that, but it was nice to think about. It was nice to imagine that there was nothing to worry about, that they could simply enjoy the Christmas season like two regular people, a regular couple, two things he hadn't felt like in a long time.

When quitting time rolled around, he considered checking in with the station, then decided against it. He'd enjoy dinner with Joyce; he'd spend just one night forgetting about all the madness that was going on out there. The world could keep spinning without him.

Just for one night.

15. Chapter 15: The Formal

"You come up with any ideas?" Lucas asked Mike. The two had been stymied for days, both equally frustrated over the fact that they had to do something out of the ordinary to get their girlfriends to go to the Winter formal with them. Neither of them could understand why they needed to go above and beyond. Why couldn't they just ask? Yet another mystery in the mind of 9th grade girls. Or women in general, for all they knew.

On the other hand, Mike had started to think of a handful of ideas that could potentially work. He wanted to work out something that used things that El was interested in—maybe movies or music. It would be creative and it would show that he had been paying attention. That was the goal, right?

There was no reason for this to be so difficult.

"Sort of," said Mike. "You ever think that they're just doing this to make us suffer?"

Lucas looked down and kicked at some imaginary rock on the ground. "To be fair, man, we kinda asked for it. You remember what we did, right?"

Mike cringed. How could he forget? El would never let him live that down. That was another part of the reason why he wanted this to go so smoothly. It was his chance to make it up to her.

"So what are you thinking?" asked Lucas.

"I want to keep it a surprise," said Mike. That was partly true. At the same time, he didn't have too much of a concrete idea yet and he didn't want to make himself sound like an idiot. He considered himself a good boyfriend, but in terms of being romantic, he didn't know what to think about himself. It just wasn't something he had experience with.

"I was hoping you could give me some tips," said Lucas. "Cuz I've got nothing at all."

Mike shrugged. "I don't know if I'm the right person to ask for tips on this." He almost suggested that Lucas ask his sister, but then Mike remembered just who Lucas' sister was. And that was a terrible idea. "I'd think things would be easy for Max. Just keep it skateboarding related. Maybe some game reference. I don't know."

Lucas looked thoughtful. "Hey, that's not too bad of an idea," he said. "I could use that. Thanks, man."

"If we can't help each other with this, then what can we do?" asked Mike. "You know I got your back."

He spoke with a little more optimism than he felt. His main idea right now boiled down to something related to her locker and to some musician she liked. Mike was hopeless at something as romantic and heartfelt as poetry, but surely there was some artist that could say the right thing so Mike didn't have to.

Mike wanted it to be perfect—or as perfect as he could get it. The reason was simple. He wanted to give El the best Christmas time he could. The unspoken future was still hanging over them and he was determined to make the most of their time.

Lucas was already walking away to class and Mike decided he should probably be doing the same. As he swung his locker open, he muttered to himself, "Bowie... why does it have to be Bowie? He's not romantic... he's just weird."

He then quickly glanced around to make sure that El wasn't there and hadn't heard him. The last thing he needed was El hearing him badmouthing her musical inspiration. Fortunately, her telltale head of brown hair was nowhere in sight.

...

"I've already got Lucas' gift," said Max. "For Christmas, that is. I figured I owed it to him to get him something nice after all the trouble he's going through for the Winter formal."

El grinned. She couldn't wait to see what Lucas and her boyfriend had come up with for the formal. She was more excited to see the

look on Mike's face when he had to do something uncharacteristically romantic. But she agreed with Max. She didn't just want to watch Mike squirm—she wanted to do something nice for him too. But what?

"I haven't found anything," she said, feeling a little defeated.

"We'll work on that together," said Max. "It's fun. What kinds of things does he like?"

El had to think. "Ghostbusters," she said. "And Star Wars. He loves Star Wars."

"Then you have to get him something to do with one of those!" said Max. "But if I were you, do you know what I would do?"

"What?" asked El, desperate to be pointed in the right direction.

"Find something new. Something that you know he'd love, but that he doesn't know he'd love yet. It's risky, but when it works, it pays off *huge*. It shows you really know him, right?"

El nodded slowly. And she did really know Mike, right? Better than she knew anyone else. She felt a little nervous. Maybe this would reveal that she didn't know him as well as she thought she did. "I think I could do that."

"Why don't we go to the mall after school?" asked Max. "We can start looking around for you. I bet you'll be surprised at just how much you can find. You'll probably end up finding so much that you won't be able to get everything. It's fun!"

El smiled, starting to feel a little more encouraged. "Thanks, Max," she said. Her red-haired feisty friend always knew what to say to make her not only feel better, but feel stronger and smarter too. Friends didn't just make it other feel good—they made each other more successful. That was one thing that El had learned over her time with the party.

She resolved to find him the best gift possible. Max was right—a trip out with just the two of them would do them good. She needed to get out of her head for a little, and that was just the way to do it.

...

"This is impossible!" cried El. They had only been shopping for fifteen minutes and she had already seen so many things that Mike might like. There were Star Wars figures, there were even Star Wars *books*, with stories that weren't in the movies! Poster, shirts, an unimaginable flood of things that he would no doubt find awesome. And that was only for Star Wars!

"Easy!" said Max, trying to not laugh. "Take it slow. There's a lot to look at. Just enjoy the search for now. We can find the answers later, right?"

El shrugged and sighed. This just all seemed so hard to her.

"Here, look over here," said Max, indicating another store in a seemingly endless row of stores that contained all the perfect things for Mike.

El shrugged and walked in, but then she saw something that caught her for two reasons—it looked totally new to her and it looked like something that Mike would absolutely love. Shelves and shelves of figures—she guessed technically they were toys, but she knew that Mike didn't like when people called his figures toys.

These were figures she had never seen before—Mike certainly didn't have any of them. They looked like robots, all sharp engineering and weaponry. And what did it say on the package...? They turned into something else! They weren't just robots, they were vehicles, too!

"What are these?" El asked Max excitedly.

Max looked, as she had clearly not been paying attention to the display in the same way that El had.

"Those? Transformers," said Max. "You've never heard of Transformers?"

El looked at her blankly.

Max sighed. "Of course you haven't. It's a show. A cartoon, really. All the guys like to pretend it's just for kids, but they aren't fooling

anyone. Transforming robots from space? You know they all love it." A look of realization dawned on her face. "Oh. Oh! You think Mike might like them?"

El nodded, a little nervous. "I mean, maybe it's a bad idea. Maybe they're just kids' toys."

Max looked at the figures with a discerning eye. "Hmm... you know, I think you might be on to something. Why don't you get him two of them? One of the good ones and one of the evil ones. They'd look great on his shelf."

El nodded excitedly and reached for a large red and blue one and a large grey one. As she took them off the shelf, she said, "I want to get him something else, too, though."

"Yeah?" said Max. "Like what? You sound like you have something in mind."

"Something personal. I mean, he'll love these. I think. But I want to get him something special. Maybe I can make it. I want it to mean something. In case..." Her voice trailed off, but her meaning was clear.

"You'll think of something. Why don't you work on making him a gift? That'll mean so much more than just buying something else from a store."

El looked uncertainly at the two Transformers. "Do you think I shouldn't get these?"

Max laughed. "No way! Definitely get those. He's going to love them. But you're right—think about making something. It'll be so worth it."

El smiled happily as she approached the register. Maybe she'd do some research into these "Transformers." It'd be nice to be able to teach him about something nerdy for once, instead of the other way around.

...

Mike was bent over a table in his basement, working hard on

something that he had never thought he would be spending this much effort on.

It was a large sign, one that he planned on affixing to the front of El's locker before she got to school. He'd have some flowers for her too—red roses, because that was the only choice that would work. Part of this was overwhelmingly embarrassing, but a large part of him was proud of what he had come up with. Even better, he had come up with it on his own—it was truly his creation.

He took a step back and glanced at his work. It wasn't finished, but it was still looking pretty good. Of course, once he finished this, he was going to have to start thinking about her Christmas present, which he currently had no idea about. It wasn't fair! Why did he have to go from one major decision to another, with so much riding on it.

Of course, El wouldn't be *that* mad with him if he screwed it up. She got mad at him when he deserved it. He knew that now, even if it was hard from him to admit. All those things he had done in the past, not that long ago—he knew that they had been stupid. Or even selfish. And anyway, he could have fixed almost all of those issues just by talking to her.

Now, though, he wanted to just leave that all in the past. They had other things to focus on now, like all the good memories they were making. All the happiness they were creating. And if he needed to make a fool of himself to put a smile on her face, then that was just what he was going to do.

Then he had a thought. He dashed to the phone, picking it up before his nerve failed him. He hesitated only a second before dialing the number that he had come to learn over the past few weeks.

It only rang twice before someone picked up.

"H-hello?" said Mike, his voice wavering momentarily.

"Kid?" said Hopper, sound first confused, and then worried. "What's happening? Did she say something? It's way too soon, isn't it?"

"Yeah," said Mike. "I mean, no. She didn't say anything. I was calling

for a different reason. I don't know if you know, but the Winter formal is coming up. I wanted—"

"Jesus, kid, you're not marrying her. You don't need to ask my permission."

"No, I mean, I wanted to ask if you would like to be there when I ask her to go. I... made a sign. And everything." He paused, waiting for Hopper's response, afraid he had just made a terrible mistake.

Hopper didn't say anything for so long that Mike almost asked if the Chief was still there, but he decided that interrupting Hopper's train of thought was probably a bad idea.

Finally, Hopper spoke, and his tone was surprising to Mike. He sounded grateful. Touched, even. "Yeah, kid. I'd really like that, actually. Thanks for even thinking to ask. Do you know where you're going to do it?"

"Well..." said Mike, "I'm thinking tomorrow or maybe the next day. The formal is coming up and I'd rather do this sooner, right?"

"Smart kid," said Hopper. "Just give me the time."

Mike gave Hopper the details, then he had a thought. "You don't think that the office is going to give you a hard time getting in, do you? They can be weird about that sometimes."

Hopper snorted. "Perks of being the chief, kid. I can pretty much go wherever I want."

Mike was preparing to hang up the phone when Hopper spoke one more time. "And kid... thanks for thinking of me. I know this probably wasn't an easy phone call to make. I appreciate it. Took a lot of guts to pick up that phone."

Mike grinned. "Yeah, it wasn't easy. I'll see you then, I guess?"

"Thanks, kid. For giving her all she deserves."

Mike hung up the phone without saying what else was on his mind—that he couldn't give her all she deserved. No one could—she

deserved far too much for anyone to give her everything she deserved. He could only do his best.

...

El came into school the next day with her usual tired demeanor. Mornings were just really not her thing. Hopper had seemed to be in a great mood that morning, which felt unusual to her. He had the same morning mood that she did—tired and annoyed that anyone would dare disturb his rest. That being said, today he was not feeling that way. He had been hurrying around the house—maybe he had slept in a little too late—but he hadn't been as grumpy or taciturn as he usually was.

He gave her a big smile as she got out of the truck to go to school. "Have a great day," he said. "Can't wait to hear all about it!"

El gave him a funny look, then got out of the truck and closed the door, preparing to face another day. School had been going as well as could be expected—she enjoyed the experience, even if she didn't always enjoy the work. She felt like a regular kid, which was not something that she had ever experienced before to this extent. Sure, she still got weird looks from a lot of them, but that was part of the normal kid experience too.

She made the walk down the hallway to her locker, without looking up too much from the ground. She wasn't awake enough yet to make eye-contact with anyone else. Just a few more minutes of solitude was all she needed—

But that was an awful lot of people gathered around her locker, so she figured it was probably a good idea to look up.

When she did, her breath left her in a gasp.

There was a sign affixed to the front of her locker, a huge one, one that was clearly handmade and had many hours of work behind it. The sign read, "Put on your red shoes and dance the blues—with me?" Underneath that line were words, "Let's dance!" The sign was obviously a reference to "Let's Dance," by David Bowie, and she knew just who had made it.

"Go to Winter formal with me?" asked Mike, who was now standing behind her. She spun around and threw her arms around his neck, kissing him in the hallway, not really caring who saw her.

"Yes!" she cried when they separated. "Thank you so much! It's perfect!"

It was only then that she noticed the flowers that he held in his hands, a bundle of roses that looked like the most beautiful bouquet she could possibly imagine.

The kids around them in the hallway started to clap and Dustin clapped Mike on the back. "You did good, man," Dustin said. Mike had a huge grin on his face, so excited to not only have accomplished his goal but to have done it in such a perfect manner.

El could see over Mike's shoulder that there was an adult standing and watching. She wondered if maybe she was about to get in trouble for the public display of affection, but then she saw who it was—Hopper!

Mike grinned sheepishly as he saw who she was looking at. "Yeah," he said. "I thought he might want to see it."

El detached herself from Mike and then ran to hug Hopper. He hugged her back, looking a little self-conscious, but still smiling. "I'm not even going to yell at him for that kiss," said Hopper. "See how restrained I am?"

El laughed. "It was my fault!"

"Yeah, that's why I'm not going to yell at him."

El felt like she was floating. She couldn't remember being this happy. Never did she imagine that Mike would pull off such an amazing feat. "It's so perfect!" she said to Hopper, dancing away down the hallway to take the roses from Mike.

Hopper watched her go with a smile, then turned to leave. His work here was done. Let her enjoy the rest of her day. If he remembered his time in high school at all, she would be the talk of the school for the rest of the day. You didn't get asked to a dance like that without

everyone noticing.

...

The dance approached faster than anyone was prepared for. El felt like time was moving too fast and she was caught in a strange predicament. Part of her couldn't wait for Christmas and for the formal. But at the same time, she wanted to enjoy as much time as she could with her friends before she had to embark on her mission to the Watcher.

Now, though, she was standing in her bedroom, looking at the mirror that Hopper had placed in it for her. El stared at her reflection, trying to decide if she looked pretty enough or if more work needed to be done. There was a knock on the door and she looked curiously, wondering who it was. It wasn't like Hopper to come to her door like that, but then again, who else could it really be?

"Can I come in?"

It was Mrs. Byers! El was confused, but happy. She skipped to the door and then opened it, allowing the woman who had felt like her mother into the room.

"Honey, you look beautiful!" said Joyce as soon as she saw El. "That dress is amazing!"

El looked down at her dress with a big smile. "You like it?" she asked. "I picked it out myself."

"I love it! You did a great job."

El asked the question that was on her mind. "Why are you here? I'm glad you are... but why?"

Mrs. Byers smiled. "Hopper called me. He thought maybe you'd like someone to help you get ready. I thought that was a pretty good idea, because I remember what it was like when I was your age, getting ready for a formal. Pretty stressful, right?"

El nodded. "I know Mike won't mind. But I want to look perfect!"

Mrs. Byers looked like she knew just what El was talking about. "I know what you meant. But you have to remember that no matter what, Mike is going to think you're perfect. So you know what that means?"

"No," said El. "What are you talking about?"

"You have to do it for yourself," said Mrs. Byers. "Don't just look good for him—because you matter too. You need to look good for yourself. If you can't look good for yourself, then what's the point?"

It made so much sense to El. Yeah, she wanted Mike to think she looked good. But the real reason she wanted to look good was just because she wanted to *feel* good. It was something that she had talked about with Max before. Boys mattered, yeah. Especially Mike, because she cared about him so much. But even so, she had to remember that she was her own person, who mattered just as much as Mike did. He even told her that on numerous occasions—it could just be hard to remember it. So much of El's life was spent helping other people that she sometimes forgot to think about herself, even when it was something as simple as this. But now...

"Let's do it!" said El, feeling more excited than ever. "Can you finish my make-up?" It was something that El was slowly learning, but needed as many tips and as much improvement as possible. She wouldn't pass down the chance to have someone else, especially someone with as much experience as Mrs. Byers, do her make-up for her.

"I think we can make that happen," said Mrs. Byers with a gentle smile. She swiped at something in her eye and El wondered for only a second if Mrs. Byers was crying. But that couldn't be it—what was there to be sad about? It was a joyful moment. It was going to be one of the most magical nights of El's life.

It was going to be perfect.

...

"Thanks for driving us," said Mike to Jonathan, who was about to stop his car outside Hopper's house. "I could have asked my mom..."

but..."

Jonathan laughed. "Yeah, I get it. There's nothing more uncool than having your mother drive you to the Winter formal. No one ever wants to be that guy."

"You don't mind?" asked Mike.

Jonathan shook his head. "No way. I'm happy to do it. Wish someone would have given me that chance when I was in school."

Mike looked out the window nervously, but he knew exactly what he had to do.

"Go get her," said Jonathan. "She totally thinks you hung the moon, by the way. You have nothing to worry about."

Mike knew that, but still felt like he had swallowed a beehive. He couldn't help feeling nervous—it was a big night and he wanted to make it the best he could. He opened the car door and stepped out, making the short walk up to Hopper's door. It felt like he had walked ten miles by the time he got there.

Mike rang the doorbell and waited for her to answer.

She didn't. But Hopper did, only a few moments later.

"Hey, kid," Hopper said, his voice gruff. "I'll let her know that you're here." His head disappeared inside the house for a moment and then popped back out. "And just so you're aware, I've been cleaning my gun. Works really well."

Mike swallowed. "I bet it does, sir."

Hopper grinned, then disappeared again, leaving Mike to wait for his girlfriend to appear in the doorway.

El came out only a minute later, and Mike's breath caught in his throat. She looked incredible! Her hair was curled and styled perfectly and her make-up looked like it had been done by a professional. Her dress was the perfect deep shade of blue, that made her hair and her eyes look even better. She smiled at him a little

shyly.

"You—you look—wow. El, you look—"

"Amazing?" El suggested.

"I was going to go with perfect," said Mike. "But amazing works too. Are you ready to go?"

El nodded and stepped out the door, taking Mike's arm as she went. Mike led her to the car where Jonathan was still waiting for them to return. Mike made sure to open the door for her and close it carefully after she was in—being sure to not get her dress in the door. He had been warned about that by Nancy. Apparently someone had done it to her in the past and Mike was eager to not repeat that mistake.

Jonathan was kind and aware enough to not say anything to the two of them as he drove. Mike and El were talking quietly in the back, and Jonathan was keeping his eyes on the road, more or less pretending that he wasn't there.

Until, of course, they pulled up at the school, where the dance was being held in one of the gyms. "Have fun, you two," Jonathan said with a wink. "I can't wait to hear all about it. Or, you know, maybe not."

Mike smiled. "Thanks for driving us, Jonathan. It means a lot."

"Maybe one day you can owe me a favor," Jonathan. "But mostly I just want you to enjoy yourselves. I'll see you in a few hours."

Mike and El got out together and walked towards the doors, which were wide open, inviting the students in. They stepped inside and took a look around at the area right outside the gym, which was decorated out into a winter wonderland. There were blue streamers and sparkling snowflakes draped over the walls and a big banner hanging over the entrance to the gym where it seemed the dance had already begun.

Mike handed a teacher their tickets and they stepped inside the darkened gymnasium, letting the music and the sound of other students enjoying the dance wash over them.

El spun around in her dress, taking in everything around her. There was so much, and it was all so beautiful! She laughed and grabbed Mike's hand. "I love it all!" she said. "It's so... wintery!"

Mike chuckled. "It definitely is wintery."

"Let's dance!" said El, taking Mike's hand and leading him out onto the floor.

Mike gulped nervously. He had hoped to at least be able to say hi to people before El got it into her head that she needed to hit the dance floor. But he couldn't complain. He wanted to give her the best night possible, and if that meant making a fool of himself in the middle of all his peers, then that was what he would do.

El laughed as the two of them danced to some terrible pop song, something that Mike would never be caught listening to under any other circumstance. But that was what you did at these things—you laughed and you enjoyed yourself and you got lost looking in your girlfriend's sparkling eyes because she was so happy and she deserved every minute of this.

He glanced around, and noticed Max and Lucas dancing together too; Lucas was wearing an expression that looked remarkably like how Mike felt. Max was wearing a black dress that she had no doubt spent hours agonizing over, wanting to look as good as she possibly could. Lucas was dressed similarly to Mike—a classy shirt and a tie that would no doubt be coming off not too much later in the evening. Mike made a note to himself that he needed to go and say hello to them, maybe when this song was over. He was so thrilled to see that El looked like she was having the time of her life and the night had only just begun.

Finally, the song was over, and it was Mike's turn to tug at El's hand. "Let's go say hi to everyone," he said. "Everyone is here!"

El nodded eagerly. The couple walked over to where Lucas and Max were standing to greet them. "Hey guys!" said Mike. "Having fun?"

Lucas bit his lip. "Not as much fun as El seems to be having. But, uh, yeah, we're having fun. Right, Max?"

Max rolled her eyes. "I mean, I'm having fun. I know you two squares hate dancing, but I appreciate that you're even bothering to make an effort for us cool kids. Really means something."

El giggled and then looked around. "Where's Dustin?" she asked.

Lucas jerked a finger over to a nearby table, where Dustin was sitting down, watching the dance from afar. "He's a little down," Lucas said. "Cuz he isn't with Suzie. I get it, but it wouldn't kill him to have a little fun."

"Let's go talk to him," said El. "He has to enjoy himself! Suzie would want him to!"

Mike had to agree with El—she usually did a good job of getting the rest of the party's spirits up, even when they were feeling down for one reason or another. It wasn't that El was especially insightful (though she could be). It was just the way she talked to them, the way she looked at the world. She had so much unbridled joy and appreciation for the things that happened around her. So many things she was seeing or experiencing for the first time and it made everyone else smile to see her have such a good time.

The party approached the table that Dustin was sitting at. He was looking down at the ground and seemed to be wishing that he was literally anywhere other than the dance. It wasn't until the party pulled seats up next to him that he even noticed they were there.

"Oh. Hey, guys," he said.

"What's going on, man?" asked Mike. "You look absolutely miserable."

Dustin put on a smile, but it was pretty obviously a fake one. "Oh, I'm good. You guys go enjoy yourselves, yeah?"

El shook her head. "Not without you."

"I just... don't... really want to dance that much," said Dustin. "But don't let me hold you guys up from having a good time."

"We know you're sad about Suzie," said El. "I'm sad she's not here too. But you know what she would want?"

Dustin looked confused. "No," he said. "What would she want?"

"She'd want you to have a good time," said El. "She'd want you to have fun!"

Dustin shrugged. "I just miss her a lot, you know? Doesn't feel right not dancing with her."

Max shook her head. "Yeah, but what do you think she would do if she saw you sitting around, moping because she wasn't here? She wouldn't be too happy about that, I don't think."

Dustin scratched his head. "Oh. Yeah, that's probably true."

"So what are you doing?" asked Mike. "This isn't like you at all. I mean, I'd miss El a lot too, but—"

Everyone in the party rolled their eyes because they knew what Mike would do if El wasn't around. They had seen it for a whole year—and that was before they were even dating! Probably not the best time for Mike to be making statements about how someone else handles being away from the person they were in a relationship with.

"Get up and dance!" said El. "Suzie would want you to! Maybe we can even get them to play Never-Ending Story..."

Dustin shuddered. "Once was enough. I will never go through that in public ever again. You're lucky that I even went through it at all. I saved the world with my song!"

Lucas and Max glanced at each other. "I mean... that's one way to look at it," Lucas said. "Why don't we save that discussion for later, huh?"

Dustin looked like he was prepared to argue the point until El grabbed his arm and tugged him off his seat. "You only get one Freshmen Winter formal!" she declared.

Dustin looked confused. "I mean... yeah, that's true but what does that have to do with...?" But he didn't resist as she pulled him onto the dance floor.

"It's not worth it," said Lucas shaking his head. "Arguing with girls is never worth it."

Mike shrugged and laughed. Lucas was right, there was no point in arguing. But in this case, who cared? El was right, Suzie would want them to all be having fun together, even if she wasn't there. And they couldn't just let Dustin sit there and be sad by himself. They were the party—they had to look out for each other!

Once they were back out on the dance floor, Dustin's entire mood seemed to change. He wasn't down anymore—he had a huge smile on his face. Mike understood how his friend felt. If he had been missing El and feeling alone, it would have made him feel so much better just to see that they were still thinking about him and that he wasn't as alone as he felt.

There were so many other students there and he barely recognized a fraction of them. It served as a reminder of how crazy their lives had become recently and how little attention he had been giving to school. It was something he was going to have to change... eventually. There was just too much going on right now for him to focus on something like schoolwork or a social life. No one had any idea what it was like—adults struggled to understand what being a kid was like in the best of times. Throw in the potential end of the world, and there was just no way.

Mike decided to follow his own advice. It was time to enjoy himself and forget about the future. Stop worrying so much and just have a night of fun. Besides, El looked so happy and so beautiful, and all his friends were here. High school hadn't changed anything, not the important stuff at least. They were still the party. They always would be.

...

The night passed too quickly, and soon, the DJ was making an announcement that the last song would be starting next. It was sure to be a slow song, if Mike knew anything about school dances. He took El's hand and smiled at her. She smiled back, beaming from ear to ear, so pleased with the way the night had gone. For Mike, it had been even better than expected. He had only hoped to be able to give

El what she had wanted, and it seemed that he had done that and more.

"Dance with me," she said gently, and he went with her onto the floor, not arguing, ready for the final dance in a night that had been just perfect.

The song started and Mike and El couldn't help but laugh as they held each other and moved slowly from side to side. It was a song that they both knew very well, under a very similar circumstance—Cyndi Lauper's "Time After Time."

"Mike..." said El as they moved to the music. "Thank you so much."

Mike smiled, a little embarrassed. "I barely did anything."

"You made it perfect."

"I think we did that together," said Mike. "You think I'd be standing here, dancing badly in front of all my classmates, for anyone beside you?"

El laughed. "You don't even know most of these people. You said that!"

Mike looked around the room for a second. "I guarantee that there are at least ten people in this room *right now* that might recognize my face if they squinted really hard," he said. "It's risky."

El laughed again, but then Mike got serious.

"But El, I'm not kidding. I wouldn't want to be here right now with anyone except you. And I know people say we're too young to be saying things like that, but I know what I feel. No matter what happens, I'm so glad we got to have moments like this. I'll never forget them—ever."

He was telling the truth. The way the light was shining down through the crystalline snowflakes suspended from the ceiling, the way El looked, the way she smiled. He'd never forget.

"I love you, Mike," said El, beaming wide. "Thank you."

"You don't have to thank me," he said seriously. "I should be thanking you."

"I'm just so happy," she sighed, leaning her head on his chest. "You make me so happy."

Mike could hardly believe that they had come this far. It was difficult to imagine that El had once been a scared and desperate girl, barely capable of speaking, unaware of even the most basic rules of society. She had grown into someone amazing, someone that Mike was just so proud of. She had accomplished so much. They had all accomplished so much.

The song began to die down and the lights came back on. The students in the gym let out a collective groan as they were returned, unceremoniously, to reality. Mike looked down at El and smiled, but she had a sudden look of terror across her face. Mike leaned back, confused and surprised.

"El? What's wrong?"

"Nothing," she said, separating from him. But her words were clearly a lie as she took off across the gym, heading in the direction of the bathroom. Mike watched her go and wondered what could possibly be going on.

...

El stormed into the bathroom, practically shaking with fear and rage. Not now. It couldn't be now! That would be—

No. She wouldn't allow it. She would talk to the Watcher, she would lay out her terms—

Tiffany Meyer, the girl El had almost punched in the face, was standing in the bathroom with her two friends, looking menacingly at El. "Look who it is," leered Tiffany.

"Shut up," said El, who was not in the mood for another confrontation. "Mouth-breather."

"*What* did you just call me?" demanded Tiffany.

"*Get out!*" shrieked El, and every door to every stall in the bathroom slammed open with a violent force.

Tiffany and her friends looked around with fear in their eyes, then slowly edged toward the door. El didn't even watch them go. She didn't have time for them. Not today.

The voice of the Watcher was in her head, telling her it was time.

But it couldn't be time, not yet.

El entered one of the stalls and shut the door behind her. Then she shut her eyes and prepared to make one final bargain for only a few more days of a life with her family. With Mike. With the world that she had come to love so much.

One final bargain for just a little more freedom.

16. Chapter 16: The Eve

(A/N: Only a few chapters left. Thank you to everyone who has stuck around for all of this. This is by far the longest story I have ever written and I can't wait for you all to see how it ends.)

It is time.

The voice rang loudly in her head. It was the same way she remembered it—painful and wrong, the product of something monstrous and evil.

"I need more time," said El. "It's too soon."

That was not part of the bargain.

The Watcher's "voice," if it could really be called that, made it clear that there was no room for argument in this case. El was going to argue it anyway. There was no other option.

"I don't care what you think," said El. "I'm telling you how this is going to be."

The Watcher responded to her this time, but it wasn't in words. It was a feeling, an overwhelming wave of rage, one that was bearing down on her mind and crushing any thoughts that were trying to form in her head.

This is not a debate. You are coming through, and you are coming through now.

El fought past the wave of emotion that was pressing down on her thoughts, drew herself up tall, and responded. "You need me. I don't care. You can threaten me and you can throw whatever you want at me, and I'll just give it back to you. I'm not afraid of you." There was only one thing she was afraid of, and that was being forced to lose her friends and her family.

The Watcher roared another wordless scream. But it didn't matter—there was nothing that it could do or say that would convince her that now was the time. El realized that this wasn't bargaining, not

really. She wasn't putting terms into place. She was simply telling the Watcher how things would work.

I am telling a god what to do.

The thought brought her some satisfaction, but then brought her the reminder that she would be forced to physically enter that other world after not too long a time. All this would do was buy a little more time at the very best.

You cannot delay this forever. The voice rumbled into her head again.

"I know," said El. "I won't try. I just need a little more time. It's almost Christmas. It's—" But she let her voice trail off because there was no point in arguing with something that was this inhuman. Chances were high that it didn't even have an understanding of what a holiday was. Or what family was.

You cannot run from me forever. You cannot even comprehend what forever means.

"I don't have to," said El. "I don't need forever. I'll be back. This is going to end. One way or the other."

The Watcher did not respond this time, but it didn't need to. She knew what it was thinking. It was allowing itself the pleasure of anticipation, as it looked forward to the completion of its ultimate goal. El felt a shiver run down her spine, as she once again realized that she was the last line of defense before reality crumbled into a mess of insanity.

"I'll be back," said El again. "Count on it."

...

El stumbled out of the bathroom stall, gasping. There was no one in the bathroom anymore, after she had scared those girls out before speaking to the Watcher. Her heart was racing and she could feel beads of sweat forming on her forehead. If sending her mind there was this taxing on her, she couldn't imagine what it would be like to have to go there for any longer than she had when she and Hopper had accidentally fallen through.

Mike and the party was standing outside the bathroom when she emerged, looking at her with concern on their faces.

"What happened?" asked Mike. "What did you see?"

El realized that her nose was bleeding, and she wiped it on the back of her hand. It struck her then that her nose had not been bled like that in a long time. Things had changed.

"Nothing," said El, as she searched for a napkin to clean the blood up. "Nothing happened."

Mike motioned to the rest of the party to leave, waving his hands. He moved closer to El. "El, what's going on?"

El looked him, trembling slightly. "Time's almost up," she said quietly. "It wants me. Now."

Mike's eyes were wide with fear. "It can't have you now! It's too soon!"

El knew that Mike was right, but there was no reasoning with the Watcher. She could not stretch things out for much longer. "I have until Christmas," El said, shaking her head. "I can't... there's no more time. I have to take care of this."

"It isn't fair," said Mike, putting his arms around El and resting his chin on her head. "Why should you be the one to have to worry about all of this?"

"There's no one else to do it," said El. "I'm the only one who can." It was funny. She had spent so long worrying about who she was—or what she was. Now, though, she realized it didn't really matter. She was the only one that could prevent this calamity from occurring. It was time to look beyond herself.

"What do you think I am?" asked El.

Mike didn't pause to think. "I think you're the strongest of us," said Mike. "I think you've always been. I think if there's anyone that's going to be able to finish this, it's you. But you know what else I think?"

El looked at Mike with confusion. "What?"

"I think we need to make this the best Christmas anyone has ever had," said Mike. "There's no question. It just has to be."

El hugged Mike tightly and rested her head on his chest. "Thank you," she said. "I've been so happy."

There were students filtering out of the gym on either side of them, but the two 9th graders were in their own little world. If there was only going to be a little time left, then they were going to take advantage of every second of it, regardless of what anyone else thought. That was the way they had lived for awhile, and there was no reason for either of them to stop it now. If anything, it made even more sense for them to do it now that their time was so limited.

El vowed to make the most of it—whatever remained.

...

Christmas break started not long after. El found it impossible to concentrate on her studies—how could she, when the holidays were approaching so quickly? The days were flying by and El wasn't sure what she could do to slow them down. She realized that there was likely nothing she could do, that this was part of being human.

And then, before she had barely had any time to process what was happening around her, it was Christmas eve. Her presents for Mike were wrapped, and she was sitting in her room, staring at them, hoping that he would like them. There were two—the Transformers, wrapped together to form one large package, and the homemade one, which was small and flat. She could only hope that he would like them. And she couldn't wait to be able to give them to her.

There was a knock on her door.

"Hey, kid," said Hopper from the outside. "Got a minute?"

She had been confused—where had Hopper been all day? It was Christmas eve, why wasn't he spending it with her? Maybe she had overestimated how important Christmas eve was to people. She couldn't help but feel a little disappointed anyway.

"Sure," she said. The door opened and Hopper stepped in.

"Ready to go for a drive?" he said. "Oh, and you're going to want to take those presents with you. And maybe dress up just a little. Not too much. Just a little."

El looked at him with even more confusion. "What do you mean?"

"It's a little bit of a secret," said Hopper. "But c'mon, I promise you'll enjoy it. It'll be fun."

"Okay!" said El. "Just give me five minutes!"

Hopper grinned and stepped out of the room, leaving El to herself. El spent the next few minutes scrambling around the room, piecing together an outfit that would make her look presentable for whatever it was they were going to. Shortly after, she stepped out of the room, dancing down the stairs to where Hopper was sitting in the living room.

He looked at her with pride. "I'm so proud of you."

"All I did was get dressed," she said with a laugh.

"Yeah," said Hopper. "But you used to have no idea how clothes even worked. So that's pretty impressive by itself."

El shook her head. "I think I should say thank you," she said. "But I'm not sure. So when are we leaving?"

"Right now!" said Hopper, standing up and picking up some wrapped presents that were on the ground. "You ready?"

"I mean, I think so?" El didn't know if she was ready because she didn't know where they were going.

"You're ready," said Hopper. "Let's go!"

...

It didn't take El very long to figure out where they were heading—it was the Wheeler house. She didn't understand why they were

heading there, but Hopper wasn't answering any of her questions, so she supposed she was just going to have to wait until they arrived before she received any clarification.

When they parked, El noticed that there were quite a few cars around the house, and her first thought was that something was wrong. Her second thought was how ridiculous that was, and that she needed to calm down and relax. Not everything was a world ending event.

Hopper and El got out of the car and knocked on the Wheeler's front door. Nancy opened the door only a few moments later, a smile on her face. "El! Chief! It's so good to see the both of you! Merry Christmas!"

"Merry Christmas," said Hopper, warmly.

"Come on in," said Nancy, stepping aside to allow them to pass. El went in, and when she saw who was all there, she burst into a radiant smile. It was all of her friends, the whole party, their families, everyone. Steve was there, sitting next to Dustin and Robin. El was so happy that she thought her heart was going to burst.

"You're all here," she said, smiling through the tears that threatened to well up in her eyes.

Mrs. Wheeler was standing in the kitchen, looking with joy and love at her son and all his friends. "Of course!" she said. "When Mike told me you were going to have to go away for a little after Christmas, well, I just had to have a little get-together for you and all your friends."

"Thanks, Mrs. Wheeler," El said. "This is the best Christmas eve ever."

"And it hasn't even started!" said Steve. "C'mon, there's presents. And there's going to be food. It's gonna be great!"

El took her place on one of the couches next Mike, cuddled up next to him. She couldn't imagine a better way to spend her December 24th than this. Mrs. Wheeler bustled into the room with a tray that had several mugs of hot chocolate on it, setting it down on the table in the middle of the room. "Come and get it," she said. "I'll have cookies

in just a few minutes too!"

"I got you some gifts," El whispered to Mike, as the conversation resumed around them. Hopper had wandered back to the kitchen, no doubt so that he could say hello to Joyce and maybe even talk to the other adults that were in the house for the get-together.

"So how did you make this happen?" Max asked Mike, indicating all the people that were now in the house.

Mike shrugged. "I asked to have a Christmas eve get-together and she didn't want to, but then I explained that El needed to go away for awhile. That took care of things. She really likes you, you know. My whole family does."

"Do they even know me that well?" asked El.

"Do they need to?" countered Mike. "Anyone can tell right after meeting you that you're an amazing person."

El smiled.

"Why don't we open some gifts?" asked Max, indicating a small pile in the corner. El nervously looked at her gifts for Mike that she had added to the pile when they had come in.

"I don't know," said Hopper, sticking his head in the room from the kitchen. "Isn't that supposed to wait until the evening? Anyway, I think you guys might want to take a look outside. You might be surprised by what you see."

The kids jumped off the couch and ran to the window, pulling aside the curtains to see what Hopper was talking about. They couldn't believe their eyes.

It was snowing.

The party let out a cheer, even though the ground wasn't fully covered yet. The snow was coming down surprisingly heavily, and would soon have accumulated enough for them to go out and play in.

"I think I have some of Nancy's old snow clothes," Mrs. Wheeler said.

"In case you don't have any, El."

Which she didn't. It hadn't been something that she had thought about needing to buy when she had been picking out her wardrobe. "Thank you," El said, as Mrs. Wheeler came back into the room with a tray of cookies.

"So where are you going to be headed?" Mrs. Wheeler asked El, once the party was settled back onto the couch.

"Yeah," said Steve. "I hadn't heard anything about this. Dustin didn't even tell me about."

Nancy gave Steve a pointed look, telling him to shut up without having to use any words. But there wasn't any anger behind the look. Despite what had gone on between her, Steve, and Jonathan, there really wasn't any bad blood left between. After everything that had happened, they had all decided to move on and let the past alone. There was no reason to keep worrying about something that was ancient history. Even Steve and Jonathan had exchanged a few words that had been friendly enough. Nancy doubted they would ever be the best of friends, but at the very least, they could tolerate being in the same room and having a decent conversation with each other. It was a start.

El looked sideways at Mike, unsure of how to explain what it was that she was going to be doing when she did have to leave.

"She's going on a trip," said Mike. "Sort of like a research trip, I guess? She got a scholarship for it. She's going to be able to learn so much. The kind of things that I can only imagine. We're all so proud of her." He gave El a warm look and squeezed her hand tightly.

"Oh! Well, how nice," said Mrs. Wheeler. "You've all grown up so much then, haven't you?"

The party looked around at each other, and they had to admit that it was true. They had grown so much, in such a short time. Or at least it felt short to them. Just yesterday, they had been sitting in Mike's basement, rolling dice and casting spells. None of them had been thinking about high school. None of them had been thinking about

even anything as unusual as the Demogorgon, let alone an elder god like the Watcher. They had grown up in more ways than one. Physically, mentally... even emotionally. Mike thought back to the fights he had gone through with El, and how stupid they seemed now.

"Can I propose a toast?" he said, looking around at everyone who was there. "I mean, I know it's just hot chocolate. But we're just 9th graders anyway."

Hopper scratched his head. "Don't say 'just 9th graders.' Don't make it sound like you guys haven't done amazing things."

Mrs. Wheeler looked at Hopper with confusion, but Joyce put her hand on Hopper's shoulder in support. "Of course you can do a toast," Mrs. Byers said. "We would be honored to join you."

The party looked around at each other, smiling, and Mike paused to gather his thoughts before speaking. He took in the party all around him and smiled to himself as he remembered all their wonderful times together.

"Here's to all of us," said Mike. "To each member of our party and to all our friends and family. Here's to everything that we've done in the time we've known each other—all of our victories and our defeats. Here's to all of our laughs and tears. Here's to everything we still haven't done, no matter what it is. And here's to El, one of the most incredible people I could ever hope to meet in my life. She's accomplished so much in such a short amount of time and I know that in the future..." He stopped and he looked at her, and El could have sworn that there were tears in her eyes. "... I know that in the future, she's going to come back and we're going to talk about what she did while she was away. And then she's going to go on to do even more amazing things. Because that's just who she is."

The party, Hopper, and Mrs. Byers were all listening in reverent silence, and there were more than just a handful of sniffles from the audience. Mrs. Wheeler looked on in confusion, uncertain why her son's girlfriend's trip required such a speech. But then again, she did remember what it was like to be young. Surely it was just Mike being a little overdramatic. Right?

Everyone raised their mug of hot chocolate. "To El," they said somberly.

El pulled Mike closer to herself. "Thank you," she whispered into his before kissing him on the cheek.

"Always," he whispered back as the conversation resumed. "You going to be ready to go out into the snow?"

"In a little," she said. "You think we could sneak away so I could give you my gifts? In private?"

Mike smiled warmly. "Of course."

...

The two ducked out while the snow continued to fall, headed to Mike's basement, where they had both created so many memories together. It felt like it wasn't that long ago that Mike was hiding El in his basement, sneaking her food when his family wouldn't notice.

"Remember the fort?" asked El, looking where they had created her a blanket fort to hide under. She remembered how safe and secure it had made her in a time when she was anything but that.

Mike grinned. "How could I forget?" They had been so much younger back then... or had they? It wasn't that long ago, and they weren't that much older. But the person he had been back then felt so much younger. So much more innocent. He had seen so much...

He shook his head and cleared those thoughts away. It wasn't time to be thinking about such things. Mike took a seat on the couch next to El and then attempted to hand her his gift. "It isn't much," he said, "but I think you'll like it. I couldn't think of what else to get you—"

"Can I give you mine first?" El asked. "Please?"

Mike was about to try to insist on giving his gifts before she did, but one look at El's face told him that he wasn't going to be able to win that one. So he nodded and put the small package down, waiting to see what she would give him.

El had two gifts. One was much larger than the other, and that was the one that she handed to Mike first. "Thank you," Mike said as he took it.

"I hope you like it," El said nervously, looking at the ground as Mike started to remove the wrapping paper.

Mike tore off all the wrapping and looked at the twin boxes that were tied together—it took him a second to realize what they were, but when he did, he broke into a huge smile. "What—? El, these look amazing!" They were two Transformers, hulking robots that could turn into vehicles. He knew there was a show for it and he had seen the merch all over the place, but it hadn't been huge on his radar... until now.

"It seemed like something you would like," El said with a smile. "This one is Optimus Prime. He's an amazing leader. But he's not just a fighter, he's kind and he knows how important it is to protect everyone." She looked at the ground and blushed. "It reminded me of you."

Mike hugged El tightly and kissed her. Not only was her gift *so cool*, it was wonderfully complimentary to him, too. She had put so much thought into it... and she was telling him about something dorky, which was usually his kind of thing.

"That's not all I got you!" she said, picking up the second gift, which looked flimsy and thin. "Merry Christmas," she said, with a smile.

Mike opened up the second package, to see a tall manila envelope. His name was written on the outside in El's handwriting. El gave him an apologetic look. "You can't open it yet," she said. "It's a gift for later."

"Like when?" asked Mike.

"You'll know," said El. "When the time is right, you'll know."

Mike nodded and smiled sadly because he was pretty sure that he knew what she meant. But it wasn't time to talk about that yet.

"Here," he said, working to change the subject. "This is for you." He

handed her a small wrapped box.

El ripped the paper off the package, revealing the small black velvet box underneath. She looked at the box and then at Mike with wonder in her eyes. She lifted the lid of the box on its hinge, and when she saw what was on the inside, she gasped. "It's beautiful!"

It was a necklace, a small pendant on the end. Mike grinned. "Open the pendant!"

El did as Mike instructed, cracking open the pendant. When she saw what was inside, she felt her eyes begin to well up with tears. "Mike..."

It was a tiny picture of the two of them, their heads side by side, from an event that El couldn't recall.

Mike looked at the gift proudly. "I had to get the picture printed really small to fit. And then cut it perfectly. I thought it would be good to have with you. You can take it with you... wherever you go. No matter what." His voice trailed off at the end, because they both knew what he meant by that. When she went to see the Watcher. "I'll always be with you. Even when it seems like you're entirely alone."

El smiled, but the smile was sad. "Thank you, Mike."

"Merry Christmas," he said.

"I love you."

"I love you too."

There was little to say after that. Mike helped El put the pendant on, securing it around her neck. She put her hand on it and felt her heart swell. He had given it to her. He had gotten it for her. Even though Hawkins lab was far behind her, she still wasn't totally used to being given gifts so freely, even by people who she knew loved her.

The two sat in silence for a few more moments before rejoining the rest of the group upstairs.

...

"What did El get you?" Dustin demanded as soon as the two reemerged.

Mike hadn't brought the envelope with him, instead choosing to place it in a very safe spot in the basement. He had, however, brought the two Transformers with him, and was currently hiding them behind his back, wanting to impress his friends with the reveal.

"She got me..." He pulled them out from behind him, showing the party. "These!"

Lucas, Dustin, and Will's jaws dropped. Max had a satisfied smirk on her face.

"Those..." Lucas started.

"... look incredible!" Will finished.

El beamed, proud that her friends were pleased with the gifts that she had given Mike. She hadn't told anyone about the gift other than Max because she still hadn't been entirely sure if it had been a good idea. Clearly, though, it had worked out for the best. As for the other gift... well, that was a secret between her and Mike. He would read the letter when it was time. It said everything that she could possibly have needed to say, and it said it all in the most permanent way possible. She had spent a long time thinking of what she had wanted to say in it, going so far as to write multiple drafts of the letter in her attempts to make it perfect. It might not have been perfect but it was as close to perfect as she could possibly make it.

Mike poked his head past the curtain again to see the snow and then proceeded to whoop and pump his fist. "Guys, it's coming down like crazy now! Let's get out there!"

The party cheered and prepared to go change into their snow clothes, to enjoy what remained of the day on Christmas eve.

...

A few hours later, they were back indoors, covered in snow, cold but happy after a long afternoon of snowball fights. They had even made a snowman, though it hadn't quite turned out the way they intended.

The snow hadn't been willing to cooperate and the snowman had collapsed on itself once or twice. In the end, they had satisfied themselves with a half-fallen snowman, and even though it wasn't quite what she had expected, El was still proud of what they had made.

As they shook off the snow and warmed up with blankets and more cocoa, Steve leaned in by El to whisper to her. "I heard what you're going to do. You're a hero, you know that?"

El opened her mouth to protest, but Steve shook his head. "Nah, don't bother. Just know that when you get back, I'm gonna buy you as many Eggos as you want. And free video rentals for life. Or as long as I'm working there at least. I might even be able to snag you a Blade Runner poster, if you want."

El smiled and nodded. Steve knew how to make her feel better, and it was the first time that one of her friends had treated her as if she was sure to return from her showdown instead of acting like they were never going to see her again. She had to admit that even she was guilty of that fatalistic thinking herself. There were far too many times that she found herself thinking of everything she was going to miss—but if everything went right, she would be returning.

If everything went right.

And if it didn't... well, then she wanted to be sure that she left without any regrets. She was so glad they were able to have this gathering today.

"Dinner is ready," said Mrs. Wheeler, ushering everyone to the dining room. The party cheered as they entered, seeing how much food was laid out for everyone to enjoy.

"Mrs. Wheeler, this looks amazing!" Steve said as they all sat down.

Mrs. Wheeler waved a hand, downplaying the praise. "I had a lot of help," she said, indicating Mrs. Byers... and Hopper. El blinked with surprise and Hopper looked down and shuffled his feet, perhaps not wanting to admit just how much help he had given.

Everyone sat down around the table, and El took in all the people who were in her life. All the people that loved her and that she loved. She was so lucky. Even in a world where she had been subjected to terrible experiments and torture for years, she was still lucky. There was so much to be grateful for. She was more than her trauma. She was also all of her love and all of her successes, she was all of the people who stood beside her. That she stood beside.

"Thank you so much," said El, looking at Mrs. Wheeler, Mrs. Byers, and Hopper. "Thank you so much for doing this for me."

"It's the least we can do for you," said Hopper. "You've got quite a journey coming up. Maybe when you come back, we'll do it again. How does that sound?"

"That sounds perfect," said El, feeling the tears start to come. "I'd really like that."

"Well, everyone," said Mrs. Byers. "Why don't we dig in?"

And they did. The sound of conversation was loud and joyous, and El spent every free moment with her hand in Mike's. It was perfect.

It would be over too soon.

...

They decided to turn the party into a sleepover. Most of the guests went home, but the core party had stayed behind and were in the basement, just like old times. Hopper had grumbled about boys sleeping in the same room as the girl, but Mrs. Byers assured him that no funny business would occur if they were all together like that. Hopper relented, but he wasn't happy about it.

The whole party was downstairs, and Mrs. Byers and Hopper were sitting on the Wheeler's couch together, getting ready to watch whatever Christmas movie was going to be coming on next. El had come upstairs though, to say good night to Joyce and Hopper.

"Oh, hey, El," said Mrs. Byers. "Is everything okay?"

El nodded, not trusting herself to speak right away.

"What is it?" Hopper asked, raising an eyebrow.

El swallowed and said, "Oh, nothing. I just wanted to say good night. And merry Christmas." She smiled, but the smile felt fake, ever to her. She hoped they wouldn't notice. That they wouldn't say anything. Because if they said something, she wasn't sure if she trusted herself to not tell them everything.

"Good night," said Hopper. "But you know it isn't Christmas yet, right?"

"In a few hours," said El. "Soon."

"Yeah," said Hopper. "Soon. I'll see you in the morning, kid."

Mrs. Byers gave El a strange look and El was filled with fear, because the look told El that Mrs. Byers knew just what was going on. Of course she did. She had always been much more perceptive than Hopper, even if he tried his best. His perceptiveness stretched to many other things, but human relationships was not one of them.

"I love you both," said El. "Thank you for everything."

Hopper made a face at her. "Love you too, kid. But don't you think it's time you got to sleep?" He grumbled something under his breath and El thought she heard the words "boyfriend" and "can't believe I let her talk me into that."

"Yeah," said El. "I guess it is."

...

By the time El made it back down to the basement, the majority of her friends were already asleep. Mike was still awake, but by the looks of things, that didn't seem like it was going to last for very long.

"What was that about?" Mike asked sleepily.

"Just wanted to say good night," El said, lugging some blankets off the couch onto the ground. The party had littered the floor with blankets, pillows, sleeping bags, and whatever else they could find to turn the floor of the basement into one gigantic bed-like space.

"Hmm," said Mike, only seeming to be half-conscious at that point. He rolled over on the sleeping bag he was on top of to look at El. "Did you have a good Christmas eve?"

"The best I've ever had," said El with a grin. But her words were falling on ears that could no longer hear them. He was asleep.

"Good night," she said, before laying down. "Thank you." There was a lot to be thankful for. She would be thankful for these last few hours. And then...

It would be time to go.

...

She didn't set an alarm for herself. For one, she didn't need it. She had a hard enough time falling asleep to begin with—her heart was pounding so loudly that she thought for sure it would wake the entire house. For two, if there was no alarm to be found within the confines of the basement, and even if there was, it would have just woken everyone up anyway, which would have defeated the purpose.

She couldn't let them know what she was doing.

When her eyes opened, the first thing she did was try to find out what time it was. There was no hint of sunlight and the rest of the house was entirely silent, so she figured it was still a good deal of time before dawn.

El slipped out from under the blanket and stood. She had made sure to go to sleep still wearing the clothing that she wanted to leave in, and had kept a bag stashed in the corner with a few things that she wanted to bring with her. She doubted that any of them would be useful, but she wasn't going to turn down anything that could give her an advantage, no matter how small.

There was a small clock in the corner, one that looked like it had been created when LCDs were new, and it read 3:33. Good. Plenty of time before anyone would even think about being awake. El grabbed her pack from the corner and moved to the stairs, stepping as quietly as she could over her friends as she went, careful to not cause any

noise that could accidentally wake someone up.

She stood at the foot of the stairs, looking back at her friends. Back at Mike, who was still sound asleep. She wondered what he was dreaming about—if he was dreaming about anything at all. She wondered what he would think in the morning, when he realized she was gone. She prayed he didn't blame himself. It wasn't his fault. It was just the only thing she could do. After he read the letter he would understand.

Or maybe she would be able to explain it to him herself. She could hope for that, but the truth was that she didn't expect to come back from this. And even if she did come back, she wasn't sure that she would be the same. Would they even recognize her? Would she recognize them?

As she stepped out of the basement, she took a look around carefully, making sure that none of the adults were still awake. If they were, it wasn't going to totally end her plan, but it would make things more difficult.

On the couch, which she could see from her doorway, Hopper was passed out, his head back and his mouth slightly open. Joyce had fallen asleep laying down, with her head in Hopper's lap. El smiled to herself. Hopper would need someone, especially if she didn't come back. Joyce was the perfect person for that. She was glad they had each other.

El slipped out of the doorway and past the living room, heading towards the front door. She slid into her shoes, the sneakers Hopper had bought her, insisting that she needed the best ones possible so that she could keep up with all the other kids. She had tried to tell him that she didn't need them, that he didn't need to spend that money. But he hadn't listened. Looking back, it might have just been because he wanted to do something nice for her.

I shouldn't have fought him, she thought with a smile.

Then she stepped out into the night, and the door closed behind her.

...

There was a portal in the middle of the street. She couldn't see it, but she knew it was there. She could feel it.

Finally.

The word resonated in her head, in a voice that was not her own. There was no more delaying it. It would happen tonight.

"I'm here," she said, in a voice that was far braver than how she felt. "I'm ready."

She raised a hand and felt a trickle of blood emerge from her nose. The portal opened.

And El stepped through.

17. Chapter 17: The Room

(A/N: This chapter is by the strangest I've written. It was also the most fun. And it takes us past 100,000 words! The end is rapidly approaching...)

The first thing El felt was the cold. It was the same as the other times she had come to this terrible place. There was something fundamentally wrong with it, and she couldn't quite say what it was. She shivered even though she knew it wasn't the temperature. It was something else. It was a feeling deep inside her.

The Watcher was nowhere to be seen, but she knew it was there, staring at her. Waiting for her as it had been for so long. Her powers were growing to levels that they had never even approached before. The fact that she had been able to open the portal with such ease proved that beyond any doubt. She was turning into the weapon that the Watcher needed her to be. The thought both scared her and filled her with confidence. If she was capable of such feats, then surely she would be able to defeat the Watcher, right?

Right?

Confidence is a mistake. All you should feel is fear.

She didn't respond, because there was no need to. In this place, everything was part of the Watcher. Perhaps this had once been its prison, but now it had become an extension of the Watcher's will.

It was the same as the last time she had been here. A wasteland, littered with impossible formations and shapes, things that had never been nor would ever be part of earth.

It is time.

El took a step forward, but the world vanished into darkness and she felt herself falling, her head spinning, her consciousness becoming a nimbus of pain.

And that was when things became truly strange.

...

"Hello?"

It was a small room, about the size of her bedroom in Hopper's house. There were two doors that she could see, both on opposite sides of the room. There were no windows.

The walls of the room were entirely white, so white that they almost hurt to look at, and if the light had been any brighter, certainly would have hurt to look at. The floor was a solid black. It was so dark that it was at disorienting at first, almost appearing to not be there at all.

El raised her gaze from the floor and peered around, taking in her surroundings. There were two armchairs, each seated on opposite sides of a small end table. There was no obvious source of light at all. She had no idea where the bright light was coming from.

"Is there anyone here?"

But there was no response. El found herself drawn to the chairs. She couldn't say why, but it was like being drawn by a magnet. She crossed the pitch black floor and settled into one of the chairs, feeling herself sink into its surface.

"It's been so very long."

El turned her head to the side, feeling herself moving strangely slowly, as if in a dream. She should have been terrified to hear the voice come out of nowhere, but she wasn't. In fact, it felt like the most natural thing in the world. Who could be speaking to her? Hadn't she been alone only a moment ago? Did it really matter?

There was someone sitting next to her. It was someone that El recognized, though at first, she couldn't place where. The speaker was a woman, one who was quite pretty. She had short brown hair, and gentle eyes. They were eyes that looked like they had seen great and terrible things, eyes that were heavy with knowledge. Where had she seen this woman before? It couldn't have been in person... perhaps in a dream...

And then El remembered exactly where she had seen the woman. It hadn't been a vision, not quite. The woman that was looking at El, that had spoken so calmly, was familiar for one very powerful reason—it was the face that El saw every time she looked in the mirror. It was El as an adult.

El knew that this knowledge should have shaken her to her core, but she acknowledged the fact with little more than casual interest.

I'm speaking to myself.

But that wasn't true, because she wasn't actually saying anything. She was just sitting there, listening, finding it quite impossible to contribute to the conversation.

"I've forgotten what it felt like, to be that young," the older El said, smiling gently. "You must be scared."

El watched her older self with wide eyes. *I'm not scared. Not really.*

"Or maybe you aren't. It's hard to remember. So much has happened since then. Things used to be simple."

El struggled to open her mouth, to say something, anything at all. To perhaps ask if she made it through this alive, or if Mike was okay. If this was really herself from the future, there was so much that she could learn!

Perhaps that was why she couldn't speak. Perhaps she couldn't be allowed to learn that much of what had not yet occurred.

Maybe there are rules that are bigger than me.

"I wish I could tell you that I had all the answers," said the older El. "I wish I could tell you that I had found out what this room was, that I found out where all this came from. All I can tell you right now is that there are things out there that are so much bigger than us. We're only a small piece in something that has existed for longer than we could ever understand."

El's eyes were huge and it was all she could do to keep her jaw from dropping open. She felt like a fool, but how else could she possibly

react in such a circumstance? To such a confrontation?

"You're going to have to go onward," said the older El. "Maybe one day you'll come back. I did."

"I'm afraid," said El, finally unsticking her mouth and forcing the words out, with what felt like a titanic effort. "Of what comes after this."

"Of course you are," the older El said. "You're smart. One day you'll see."

"What is this?" El said, the effort of speaking taking all the energy she had in her. "Where are we?"

"Somewhere in between," the older El said. "In between worlds, in between times. I... we spent a long time thinking that we were the key to all this. But nothing is ever that simple, is it?"

"The Watcher... what is it?"

"Some things don't need an answer."

El wanted to scream at herself. *I need answers. I deserve answers!* But no one knew those words were truer than she did. What could she say to her own self?

"Why am I here?"

"Because you need to be here. One day you'll understand. At least a fraction of it, that is. Sometimes, I think that's all we were ever meant to understand. Just a fraction."

El felt the room dissolving around her, and she fought to keep it in focus. It was like a dream that she was slowly waking up out of. *No. No, I don't want to go yet. I want to stay here, where I'm safe.*

The older El shook her head. "Oh no. It isn't safe here. There's nowhere that's safe, not really. Not anymore. You'll see. You will."

El's eyes were open wide. She found herself rising from the chair, walking towards one of the doorways. Her mind was screaming at

her body to sit back down, to stay in the chair, to stay far away from what was on the other side of the doorway. But there was nothing she could do. She could feel the eyes of her older self on her back as she walked to the door. She wondered if she was making a mistake—she wondered if there was anything that she could do to change it.

...

The hallway wasn't very long, but every step down it felt like she had run a mile. Perhaps it was her fear. Perhaps it was something else. Time wasn't passing normally, and El didn't understand what was causing it.

The walls on either side of her were made of a strange material. They almost looked like they were made of cloth. If she looked close enough, she could almost see them... moving? But no, that couldn't be right, could it? That wasn't possible.

She should have been able to see to the end of the hallway. She knew that should have been able to, it wasn't that long after all. But there was something preventing her from looking any further. She walked down the hallway, taking one step at a time, her heart pounding deafeningly loud in her ears. When she reached the end, she found another doorway, identical to the first. She put her hand on the door and heard a whisper from behind her—a quiet whisper, one that was saying her name over and over, begging her to turn around.

"El... El... Eleven... Jane... it's here. Behind you. Just look. Just turn. You can see it... all of it."

She wanted to look; she wanted to see whatever it was that was calling to her, especially because it promised answers, but there was something about the voice that made her skin crawl. Something about it sounded wrong. It wasn't natural.

As she opened the door, she risked a glance behind her, hoping to see the source of the voice. El stepped through the door, only getting the briefest of looks behind her into the hallway.

There was no hallway. But there was something else, something that was occupying the space that had been the hallway only moments

ago, something eternal and something that was everywhere, something that crept and crawled through her mind and through the world.

It was the world.

It was only then, as the door closed behind her, that El knew where she was. And for the first time, she felt the true depths of fear. It felt like a cold pit opening up in her stomach, swallowing her insides up, turning her blood to ice.

She was inside the Watcher.

...

The world around was no world at all, she knew that now. It was the Watcher, exerting the grip it had on her brain. She wondered if she had gone anywhere at all, or if her body was still standing in the front yard of the Wheeler house. She wondered how much of this had been planned by the Watcher. She wondered how much of this was real, or how much had been fabricated. Was any of it real? Had she ever rescued Hopper?

Would she ever escape?

El was beginning to see just how far in over her head she was, and it was terrifying.

But the room she had walked into was hardly any different than the last. A statue of some abstract design decorated the corner. There was one couch, instead of two chairs. And there was someone sitting in the couch. Someone El recognized. Someone that she had desperately hoped to never see again.

Brenner was sitting on the couch, staring straight ahead, as if he hadn't noticed that El had entered into the room. El stood there, entirely still, not wanting to alert him to her presence. But he seemed to be utterly unaware of what was going on around him. Again, El felt the same strange pull to sit down, but she resisted. The last thing she wanted was to be anywhere near him.

Instead, she stood there and stared at him. It was like he had no idea

that there was anyone else in the room—or even that he knew where he was, or what he was doing. In fact, he reminded her of her own mama, the way she stared ahead blankly, not able to see the world around her.

"There's nothing left of him."

El turned to the side and felt yet another spike of fear. Standing in the room, only a few feet away, was Will Byers.

Will was staring at Brenner with an expression of detached interest. "He's entirely gone now. He may have been gone for quite some time now. Hard to say."

El examined Will. It looked like him; it sounded like him. It was dressed like him. But somehow, deep inside, she knew that it was not the Will Byers that she had become close with. It was not the boy who had become like a brother to her. She didn't understand how he could be there, or what his presence there meant, but it had to be tied to Brenner. Somehow.

"What are you?" El asked Will, finding it easier to speak than she had in the room where she had been with her older self.

"You don't recognize your old friend?" Will asked. But his smile was cold, almost cruel. His tone was off.

"You are not Will. I know Will. He isn't you."

Will sneered. "You think you know so much. How do you know I'm not Will? How do you know that the *thing* walking around your world isn't the fake, and that this is what happens when your friends leave you in the wrong place for far too long?"

"Because the Will that I knew would never give up. No matter how long. Friends don't give up on each other."

Will shook his head. "You have no idea. You think you understand hopelessness. You think you know what it feels like to have nothing. But you don't even know what the word nothing means. Not really."

"I lost everything!" snapped El. And then she reigned in her anger.

Because while that was true, descending into misery would accomplish nothing. In fact, that may have been exactly what the Watcher wanted.

She stopped and looked at Brenner again. "What happened to him?" There was something in Brenner's face, something she had seen before. It wasn't just the look she had seen on her own mother's face... it was something else, something more prevalent.

"The same thing that happened to so many others. Consumed. Gone. There's no part of him that isn't part of —"

Will said something. There was noise that came out of his mouth, but it sounded like the equivalent of static to El's brain. She couldn't make any sense of out of the sound, like it was something that her brain couldn't comprehend. There was only one thing that it could have meant—the true name of the Watcher.

What Will had said made sense, too. The Watcher had taken every part of Brenner's identity, and then when it no longer needed him, it had discarded him, thrown him to the side and forgotten all about him.

How was she meant to fight something that was capable of doing something like that? Somewhere inside her resided the fear that she couldn't. That no matter what she did, there was no way to overcome something this monstrous.

"You don't scare me," El said to the thing that looked like Will, but she wasn't sure how much of that was true at all. She didn't know what she felt—what was there to feel?

"You're a liar," said Will. "You think you're the hero, don't you? So ready to save the day. What if I told you that you were the villain? Would you even stop to believe me? Or are you so sure in what you've done that you wouldn't even take another opinion into consideration?"

El opened her mouth to reply, but then realized she didn't know what to say. The honest answer was that she wouldn't consider such a thing. There was no reason to. At no point in all of her experiences

had she ever been made to feel like she was doing something wrong. Even when she had briefly left Hawkins and gotten involved with a group of criminals, she had understood why they were doing those things. She had been many things—a friend, a hero, a victor, a victim, a weapon, and even a savior. But she had never been a villain. Surely there was nothing to this—another trick of the Watcher. Right?

She walked past the thing that looked like Will without responding to it. She was shaken, and she didn't want to admit it, even though she was aware that the Watcher likely knew how she felt.

"Keep walking," said Will. "Just like you always do. Blindly. Do what they tell you. You're no better than a gun. They point you at their target and pull the trigger. You don't have to do any thinking for yourself."

El approached the other side of the room, where the other door was. The hair on the back of her neck was standing up, and she felt a deep unease growing in her, stemming from whatever was behind her. She had a feeling that since she had turned her back on Will, whatever it was that had taken his form was no longer Will.

A voice, coming from the couch, caused her to turn around, allowing her to see that Will was still standing there, staring at her with naked hostility.

"Help." The voice was Brenner's, weakened, barely a whisper. He had turned his head toward her, and there was a spark of intelligence in his eyes, something that had not been there only a moment ago.

El looked at Brenner, regarding him. This was the man that had taken so much from her, the man who had all but killed her mother. Had tortured her. Experimented on her. Ruined her life.

"Please," he said hoarsely.

El looked at him, and El felt nothing.

"No," she said, before turning the doorknob and closing the door. When the door shut behind her, she could hear Brenner screaming.

...

There were flashing lights all around, a strobe-like effect that made it nearly impossible to focus on what was going on around her. It was even harder to make out her surroundings than it was before. Every time she moved, it looked like she was stuttering through the motions, like a film that was skipping frames. It was starting to give her a headache, so she shook her head and tried to cover her eyes with her arm, in the hopes that it would prevent the disorienting effect from getting any worse.

The light was doing more than simply affecting her vision. It was having some sort of deafening effect on her as well. She could barely hear anything, even the sound of her own heartbeat. That was impossible, of course. Sound didn't work like that. And yet...

I can't do this.

It was the first time the thought had invaded her mind so thoroughly. She had faced off against odds like this before, and she had always overcome them. There had never been a time when she had felt like she couldn't do it, like their party of warriors couldn't overcome it all.

But now... things were different. This was too much. She was one girl, one girl who was incapable of amazing things, but she was no god. She was nothing like this.

El looked up to where the light should have been coming from and saw nothing. There was no source of light, just an all-encompassing flashing that was filling her skull with pain.

"WHY?"

Her scream echoed throughout the empty room, further enhanced by her powers. It wasn't fair! Why should she have to be the one to see all these terrible things? To have to stare down doppelgangers of her friends, to look at the demons from her past again and again. Why her? Why couldn't she just live the life of a normal kid, someone who didn't have to worry about elder gods. The kind of kid who did homework and talked about boys and stayed up too late and got yelled at by her parents.

The light continued to flash. El covered her eyes and ran forward, desperate to escape this place that had become a hellhole. She wasn't even sure if it was a physical place at all. She was no longer sure of anything.

The flashing was gone. El uncovered her eyes and looked around, taking a second to adjust to the new level of light in the room. It was a dim room, lit by an orange glow, and at first she was so disoriented by the sudden change that she could not tell at all where she was.

Once her eyes grew used to the now dim lighting, she could see that it was a small room, one with a low ceiling. There were little tables throughout the room, each with a candle on the center of the table and two places set for a meal. She squinted a little and saw that at the front of the room, on the wall, was a bar, that appeared to be stocked with countless types of alcohol.

But as far as she could tell, there was no one in the room other than her. She turned in a circle, taking in all her surroundings. She was sure that she had never been here before. It didn't look like the kind of place that kids went to.

"El?"

The voice stunned her out of her thoughts. She whirled toward the source of the sound, and saw that it was coming from a shadowy figure who was seated at the bar. Her first thought was to run away, because nothing else she had seen in her time here had made her feel anything other than deeply uncomfortable.

Except...

This time, she felt different. The unease and discomfort from before were gone. Now she felt a curiosity and, even stranger, a feeling of familiarity. There should have been nothing in this place that was familiar. But there was something that was drawing her to the stranger at the bar. She could tell based on his size and voice that he was an adult male. It wasn't Hopper—the voice and the build were all wrong. Too young, not gruff enough. Far slimmer than Hopper was. But what other adult men were important enough in her life to appear here? She couldn't think of any others.

Her feet brought her almost involuntarily to the bar. She climbed up onto one of the raised seats, feeling her youth in how her feet refused to touch the ground, dangling above it. "Hello," she said, turning to look at the man sitting beside her at the bar.

Her breath stuck in her throat. Because even though the man was an adult, he was still someone that she recognized very well. She could never forget those eyes, no matter what.

It was Mike.

He was older, probably the same age as her older self from one of the previous rooms. He was looking at her with an expression of gentle concern, an expression that she had seen on her Mike's face many times before.

Mike still looked boyish, and his age was hard to judge. She supposed he just had one of those faces that would always look a little younger than he actually was. His hair was still dark and wavy and there was the same quiet intensity behind his gaze that she had grown so used to.

"Mike? What are you doing here?"

Mike stared at her for another moment before responding, his eyes roaming all over her face, taking in each detail. "I'm worried about you."

"How did you get here?" El insisted, terrified that this was a trick of the mind or an illusion created by the Watcher. It couldn't be Mike. It just couldn't be.

"We promised each other we'd never leave each other behind," said Mike. "I wasn't going to break that promise."

El shook her head. "But *how*?"

Mike grinned, and it was the same rakish grin that she had come to love. "Things change for us. Later on. There's so much more out there. So much that you haven't seen yet. It's not all good—maybe even most of it isn't good. But there's always going to be some sort of silver lining."

There was so much that El wanted to ask him. She found it so much easier to talk to the older version of Mike than she had with the older version of herself. She supposed that she shouldn't be too surprised by that. There was something truthful in that change. She always found it easier to admit things to Mike than to herself.

"Are... are we still together? In the future?"

Mike looked down at the bar, at the glass that he was holding in his hand. "It's a little more complicated than that. It always is, isn't it?"

El sighed. That would have been too easy, wouldn't it?

Mike looked at her again, then shook his head and laughed. "I'm sorry. This is weird, even for me. I haven't seen you like this in a very long time."

"Everything is weird," said El. "This whole place is impossible. Where are we?"

Mike looked around the room. "You'll find this place one day. It's very important to you. I don't know why we're here now. I guess it must be pretty important to me too."

"Why are we here?" asked El. "I mean, right now. Why are you here?"

Mike took another look around the room. "Who can say that? People have been trying to answer that question for all of human history. Maybe you just needed to hear that you were on the right path. That you're doing the right thing. That no matter what you see, you need to keep pressing forward."

El felt a wave of relief wash over her. If that was all that was going to happen here... she could handle that. It was the first time she had felt anything even approaching normal in all the time she had spent in this nightmare of a world. She had never expected to see Mike here, especially a Mike that she hadn't met yet.

"I'm afraid," she said. "What if I can't do it?"

"If you weren't afraid, that would be when I would start to worry," said the older Mike, with an ironic smile. "You know something? I

used to put on such a brave face. For you, mostly. But I was scared senseless. The whole time. Every single thing that would happen, I was terrified. First I was terrified for my life. Then for my friends. And then for you. I'm still scared for you. I look at you now, and I'm afraid. But you know what? I learned something. I learned that being afraid is okay and that I can't let it get in the way of what needs to be done. And you need to do this."

"Am I really talking to you?" El asked. "Are you really him?"

Mike shrugged and tasted his drink. "Who knows? I might feel like I'm him. But that doesn't mean anything at all, does it? I could be anything. I could be your imagination. A hallucination. We could both be part of someone else's dream. Or maybe I'm part of your dream. Maybe you're part of mine. Who can say?"

El sighed. "I just want to know what I have to do."

Mike smiled. "I don't think I can be the one to tell you that. I don't have the same kind of experience with world ending scenarios that you do."

El stood up from the bar, sensing that the conversation was coming to an end. "Thank you," she said. "You always know what to say."

Mike laughed, and it was almost the same laugh as the one that she saw so often from her Mike. "You tell me that so often," he said. "I never know how true it is."

El stood there for another moment, unsure of what to say or do, feeling awkward as she did so. This experience was simultaneously the most normal and the most surreal out of everything that she had seen so far. "Goodbye," she said, at last. "I guess I'll see you one day."

Mike raised his glass to her. "Someday soon. You're going to make it through this. You already have, I think."

El thought about that, then nodded. "Bye, Mike."

"Bye, El."

...

Mike. She loved him and seeing him older like that gave her hope, even if it was erroneously placed, that he would live past this. That the world would keep spinning. That even if she didn't survive this, the rest of the planet would.

It made her feel better. She supposed that might have been unusual, that she should have been more worried about herself. But seeing Mike like that had served as a reminder of what was important—all the people in her life that she loved.

Her surroundings had vanished—there was nothing left of the darkened room with the bar and the orange glow that had illuminated it all. She was exhausted, both mentally and physically, and she didn't know how much more of this trip she could endure. Would it end? Was there any way for it to end? It had to end, right? One way or the other. It had to end. She would make sure of it, no matter what she had to do.

There you are.

The voice shattered her concentration and interrupted her thoughts with such totality that she couldn't even remember what she had been thinking about in the first place.

You thought you could hide from me.

She knew what the words meant, but it didn't make any sense. She had been inside the Watcher, hadn't she? It had to have known exactly where she was. Unless... she hadn't been inside it at all. But if that was the case, then where *had* she been? The thought that there was more to this than she had known was terrifying in its implications.

"I'm not hiding," she said. "I'm right here. Come and get me."

It was time to end it all.

The Watcher rose in front of her and El could somehow see that the land around her was Hawkins, but there almost nothing left of it. It was the equivalent of a crater in the earth, with not even a hint of the town that it had been. To make matters worse, the wasteland

stretched out into every conceivable direction, as far as the horizon, leaving no hint that there was anything else left on the planet.

This is what happens if it breaks free, thought El. *I can't let my visions come true.*

The Watcher was in front of her, unimaginably huge. It was the color of decaying flesh, and the countless eyes that covered it were all staring at her with unblinking vehemence. El felt her mind straining at the sight of the monstrosity, something that should not have ever existed in the same place as humans. To say that EL was dwarfed by the size of the creature was a wild understatement. It was the biggest thing she had ever seen.

She stared up as it continued to tower over her, and her mind struggled to find the words to describe the thing. The first thing that came to her was "starfish," but that wasn't right, because it had far too many tentacles and appendages to be a starfish. An octopus? Something from under the sea? But those weren't right either, because it was right here, rising high above her, on dry land without a drop of water anywhere to be found.

Now you are mine.

And then there was no longer any time to think about what she was facing, because the eyes were staring at her, enveloping her, consuming her, and in a moment, there was nothing left of her. Just an empty wasteland and an impossibly large monster.

...

This is what it feels like to be Jane Hopper.

You are small. Infinitesimally small in the face of everything that you have seen. In the face of everything you have done. You feel this smallness, because you have been brought in front of the most terrible thing you could imagine. No, that isn't quite right, though, is it? It is far more terrible than anything you could imagine, and that thought, the thought that this goes beyond the limits of fiction, only increases your fear.

You think of everyone that you love, because now there are so many people you can put on that list, so many people that genuinely care about you. It feels your heart with joy, but it is a joy that fades as quickly a sit comes, because in this place, there can be no joy. There can be no happiness. This is no place for such things.

You are swallowed up by knowledge, the sudden, terrible knowing that things will get worse. That this force of nature is not the end of it. This was never the end of it. There is an entire world of madness, one that you were fortunate enough to be born thousands of years after.

But now you know that world is rising to meet you. It never really went away, it only disappeared. And you—you are the world's only defense against it.

You're a girl. Not *just* a girl, because there is no such thing as "just" a girl. But a girl nonetheless. A girl without the kind of experience and skills that you would need to face something like this. To drive back the end of the world.

You take stock of your surroundings, of your options, and you find your mind curiously blank. Because inside you, there is no rage. There is not righteous anger that will lead you to victory over your enemies. Inside you, there is nothing. There is an emptiness that is frightening in its totality because every plan that you had, every idea that you had prepared is now gone in the face of what you are sure will be your death.

You will never see Mike again. You will never see Hopper again. They will never forgive you for leaving like that. For leaving without saying goodbye. You treated them like they didn't matter, and now you will never speak to them again.

Or... worse than that. You will speak to them. But you won't be the one behind the words. All you will be able to do is watch as a monster controls your body and uses it to tear apart dimensions, bringing literal hell to earth.

This is what it feels like to be Eleven, the girl who could move mountains with her mind.

You feel the force of the Watcher's consciousness hit you like a tidal wave. And you are overwhelmed with knowing. Knowing what came before. Knowing what happened to the Watcher. For just the briefest of moments, a fraction of a fraction of a second, you *are* the Watcher. You feel the betrayal of your fellow entities, of the undeserved eternal imprisonment. Of the absence of the void. Of the perversion of nature that the universe became.

And God help you, for that microscopic moment, you understand why the Watcher is doing this. And you agree with it.

Until you remember—you remember Mike and Hopper. Dustin, Lucas, Will, and Max. The Byers. You remember all of them. And you understand that no matter what the alternative is, you cannot allow them to die. Maybe this is the wrong thing to do, but that doesn't matter, not now.

Something in your head unlocks. No, not in your head. It's far deeper than that. It's in your soul. Your soul opens up and you feel something pour out of you with greater force than you ever thought possible from yourself. And as it does, you know that the time has come.

You are Eleven. You are the girl who will save the world. It's time to fight.

18. Chapter 18: The Truth

(A/N: Thank you for reading and reviewing. If you've stuck around since the beginning, you'll be happy to know that the end is only a couple of chapters away. Enjoy.)

If anyone would have been there to physically see the confrontation, they would not have survived. It was a good thing that there was nothing living around to experience it, because the devastation that it would have caused was unimaginable.

El didn't see any of this, because she wasn't present for it. Her body was there, yes, but that didn't equate to the same thing. The real struggle wasn't happening on any physical plane. It was happening inside the connection that now existed between El and the Watcher.

El had absorbed thousands of years of history, so dense and so abruptly that there hadn't been nearly enough time to process what had occurred. Instead, she was standing on a beach, a coastal shore, the water only barely reaching where she stood in the sand. The sand was dark and slick, and aside from where she was standing, looked as if it hadn't been touched by humanity in a very long time, if ever.

She was staring at the ocean, which was something she had never seen before in person. Despite the fact that her life had changed so drastically since leaving Hawkins lab, she was still so often reminded of the things that she had not experienced because of the trajectory of her life.

It wasn't just the view that was captivating her attention though—it was what she could see on the horizon. It was a view that should not have been possible, even though the concept of possible and impossible had left her long ago. There were five figures floating in the air, human-shaped, high above the water, looking down on her. They were so high that to her, they looked like little more than shadows against the backdrop of the blue sky.

"Hello?" El called up to them, and felt a wave of déjà vu. She had been in this situation so many times—somewhere unfamiliar, staring down unfamiliar figures, wondering if there was anyone there to hear

her or to respond to her.

At first, the figures did nothing to show that they had even heard her. Then, very slowly, they began to descend, both down to the earth and towards the shore—towards El. She stood there and felt foolish and vulnerable, waiting for these... things to come close enough for her to see who they were.

When they did come low enough for her to see them, El blinked in surprise. Not at the fact that she recognized the figures, but at the complete opposite. She had no idea who they were. They were human at the very least.

"Who are you?" she asked, not expecting to receive a response. There were three men and two women, all of which she had never seen before.

"We are the future," said one of the women, looking at El in the same way a scientist might examine a specimen in a laboratory. The look made El's skin crawl. "The future that you are trying to subvert."

"I just want my friends to be safe," said El. "That's all. I don't want anyone to die."

One of the men shook his head. "It is a delusion of the young and the foolhardy to believe that everyone can be saved. Progress is necessary. You've seen just how weak this world is. For them to survive into the future, deaths *will* be necessary."

El couldn't understand what she was hearing. Was the Watcher planning on elevating humanity? *Was* this even the Watcher? Or was it something else?

"I don't care what you think is necessary," she said. "I won't let the Watcher out. I can't. No matter what."

The five humans in front of her exchanged a glance. If El hadn't known better, she would have said it was a look of knowing humor, but El was sure that these people, whoever or whatever they were, did not experience things like humor.

"Oh," said another of the men. "Don't you understand?"

El didn't respond, even though it was true that she had no idea what they were talking about.

"You already *have* let the Watcher out."

El said nothing. She wasn't sure what else there was to say. Her heart had dropped into her stomach and she felt as if she was on the verge of vomiting. This had been her biggest, unspoken fear. That no matter what she did, it was a hopeless situation.

"The world will change now," said one of the women. "The universe will become the way it was meant to be."

"No," said El. "You're wrong. Or you're lying. The Watcher isn't out. Not yet. Maybe it's close. But this isn't over."

She said this with certainty because on one level, she was still fighting the Watcher, using every ounce of her power to crush it—throwing bits and pieces of landscape, using its own mass against it. On this level... she was standing on a beach, talking to five strangers.

The five humans shared a look again. "Don't you see?" one of them said. "You don't know the Watcher. Not truly. Did you really believe that a mortal could look on it and retain their sanity? That your replacement father could last even the slightest of moments in its presence? No. Of course not. Imagine yourself a fish, swimming in a pond. And a person comes along, reaching their hand in to scoop you up. You dodge the hand and you consider yourself lucky, for you have seen your greatest enemy and survived. Only... you haven't, have you? You've only seen one aspect of them. One tiny part. So it is with the Watcher. The Watcher that you know is only the hand. The true form is beyond your comprehension."

El wanted to deny what they were telling her, because if it was true, it meant that all hope was gone. The problem was that she could tell that they weren't lying to her. They were either telling the truth or they believed they were telling the truth. And given everything that she had seen... she was sure that it was the former rather than the latter.

She didn't know what to say. There was nothing she could say. She

stood there on the beach, feeling utterly helpless. The five people watched her impassively, and she was struck by the sudden urge to lash out and send them flying into the ocean, even though she knew that it wouldn't accomplish anything. She almost did, but then she realized that lashing out in violence might provoke these people, and she had no idea what they were capable of.

"I won't stop," she said through gritted teeth, and more astonishingly, tears. "I won't stop until I'm dead. I don't care what you say to me. This isn't over until I'm dead."

One of the women shook her head. "Oh, child. Don't you see? You'd be better off dead. That way you couldn't go back and hurt your friends."

"I would never hurt my friends," spat El. "No matter what!"

"You might not. But what if you weren't in control? What if you could only watch while something else directed your actions? Made you commit unspeakable cruelties first against the people who saved you, and then against the rest of the world?"

El was caught dead in her tracks, unsure of what to say. There was something wrong about the argument that was being put forward to her, something that made it invalid, but her exhausted, heavily strained brain couldn't think of those reasons, at least not well enough to verbally articulate them.

All she could do was stand there numbly and whisper, "No."

"Because when the Watcher takes control of your physical form, that is exactly what will happen. The gears are already in motion. Surely you must know that much."

She did know that much. It had been shoved in her face, over and over again. But something was wrong... there was something in their words that wasn't adding up.

"There," said one of the men, lifting a hand and pointing somewhere behind El. "The answer that you've been looking for. It really is that simple."

El turned around, unsure of what she was going to see. When she saw what the man was pointing out, her mind went curiously blank. The answer was simple, it was just something that she did not want to consider, for so many reasons.

Sitting on the beach, so innocuous as to be almost absurd, was a table. It was a rough, wooden table that looked as if it hadn't been finished after being assembled. The table wasn't what had been so successful at shattering her attention, however. What was truly shocking was the object that was sitting on top of the table.

It was small and gray, and the sun glinted off of it in a way that could have been quite striking had the object not been so terrifying in its implication.

It was a gun.

The gun looked familiar. It took her a moment to place where it had come from, but she thought of it eventually. It was Hopper's gun, the one she had seen him clean many times in the evening, not because he needed to, but because it brought him peace of mind. She had asked him about it once, because it made her uncomfortable. He had nodded, in a surprising show of understanding.

"This thing saved my life many times," said Hopper. "I wish I didn't need it. I wish I never had to use it. But sometimes I do." He had paused and looked thoughtful. "That's another reason why what you can do is such a gift. You'll never need to use one."

El looked at the gun on the table and smiled to herself. It was a sad smile, because she saw the irony in what Hopper had said to her now. In order to defend the world from its greatest threat, she would need to use a gun. On herself.

"You must," said one of the men. "It is the only way to prevent the worst from happening."

El took a step forward to the table, feeling like she was barely awake while doing so. Her heart was pounding, and she could hardly form a coherent thought. As her hand closed around the gun, she wondered how she could even be considering such a thing. How could this be

the answer to everything that she had gone through? None of it had mattered! She could have so easily ended this all before it even began. It would have been better if she had never been born! And who cared what Mike or her friends said—these were all facts. Without her, none of this would have ever happened. Without her, this could end.

She looked at the gun and wondered what Mike would think. She wondered what Hopper would imagine had happened to her. She prayed that they would be able to move on, that they wouldn't think too harshly of her, and that they would understand why she had done it.

But there was a voice in her head, trying to tell her something. A voice that realized there was a problem with what was going on. A voice that was asking her to slow down, to consider what she was doing, before she made a mistake that she couldn't take back.

If the Watcher already won, why would they be so desperate for you to kill yourself? If the Watcher was already in control of your body, why would it matter?

What would it accomplish? Especially if this wasn't a physical world. It wouldn't kill her body, would it? No, it would kill something else. It would kill her mind. It would kill her will.

El looked at the gun like it was a snake about to bite her. She understood now. Maybe some of the things that had happened on this beach were true—she still needed to process what she had learned from when her mind had merged with the Watcher's. But she knew one thing was a lie—killing herself here wouldn't solve anything. It would make it much, much worse.

"You're wrong," she said, but this time there was confidence in her voice. "This isn't necessary. Because it doesn't have me yet. And I won't give myself over that easily."

She raised the gun, something she had never done before in her life—she had never needed one. But she was sure now that this place wasn't a physical location, and that the gun in her hand wasn't a gun at all.

She wished that she could have thought of a clever one-liner to deliver as she tore through the five figures on the beach, but all she could think of was her friends and how this was what she needed to do to get back to them. The gun fired five times, deafeningly loud. El flinched with each pull of the trigger, trying to ignore the sound that the bodies made when they crumpled to the sand. She had to remind herself that no one was dying here, that the people in front of her were likely nothing more than a fabrication of the Watcher, her own mind, or maybe... something else.

She stood on the beach alone, surveying the scene around her. She felt a chill—it was not the first time she had killed before, but it was the first time she had killed with a gun. It somehow felt more visceral, more impersonal. Even if the bodies on the ground weren't "real" bodies, it didn't change the way that they felt to her. She had put them there. She had pulled the trigger and made them bleed.

The beach was fading away from her now, like a half-remembered dream. The sand was beginning to slip away, falling into the void around the island. A blackness was beginning to consume the beach and the ocean, closing in on the spot where she was standing and the bodies were staining the sand with their blood.

El dropped the gun to the ground and stared up at the sky. It was no longer the clear blue sky that it had been only moments ago. Now, she found herself looking back into a gargantuan, malevolent eye, one that was watching the land around her disintegrate, waiting for its moment to lay its final claim on her.

...

The world around her was cratered. It looked like pictures she had seen of war zones from the past, gray and smoke-filled, with nothing that remained of what it once was. She was standing on the ashy ground, breathing hard, feeling the strain of what had just occurred wash over her. It returned to her like a waking dream, fragmented and almost nonsensical.

There were plumes of smoke gusting up behind her, making a striking image as she stood on the precipice of another crater. The Watcher was gone for now, at least visibly, but she knew it was still

there as an entity. As she remembered what had occurred, she could hardly believe it. There had been two simultaneous conflicts, the one happening on the beach, the one that she had been consciously aware of. And the one that had occurred here, the titanic battle between girl and god, the one that she could only recall pieces of.

She had a vague memory of nightmarish creatures throwing themselves at her, of many tentacled beasts with horrid approximations of faces and limbs trying to tear her to pieces. She had sent them scattering, with blasts of force and by using the landscape against them. By hurling chunks of landscape at them, by knocking them to the ground until they were little more than oil stains.

But... how? Her powers had never manifested that strongly before. She had been growing in power, that much was true, but an effort of this sort before would have more likely than not left her unconscious or at the very least, dead on her feet. This place had changed her. Perhaps her merging with the Watcher had changed her—opened her up to the full extent of her power.

If that was the case, The Watcher would regret bringing her here. She would use the full extent of her power to end it. Forever.

El raised a hand, acting instinctively. Everything here was an illusion, an extension of the Watcher. She would drive the illusions away and reveal the truth. She felt a gate in her mind swing open, and the power rushed out of her, giving her an even broader awareness of the world around her.

Part of her felt like it was becoming unmoored from reality. It was getting harder and harder to hold on to what was considered "real." Was the wasteland real? Was the beach real? Was the Watcher real? Was *she* real anymore, or did she exist as nothing more than a figment inside the Watcher's mind?

Or was reality the place she stood in now?

This was the ending of all things. She could feel it on every level—in her bones, in her mind, in her soul. This was the final destination, and nothing of her would remain after this if she was not successful.

She was inside now. Gone was the beach. Gone was the wasteland. There was no sign of the Watcher. She was filled with a dread that she could hardly describe. It started in her toes and emanated all the way to the tips of her fingers, leaving her light-headed and vaguely nauseous. The reason was unclear. The room around her was relatively innocuous as rooms went. It looked like she was standing in the foyer to a grand mansion, with an ornate wooden staircase that led up and out of sight. The floor beneath her was covered in a carpet that looked like it had more in common with velvet than carpeting.

She looked around slowly, feeling uneasy about gaining any new information about this place. It felt wrong to even be here, like the facade of the building around her wasn't a building at all. She lifted a hand and attempted to remove what she was sure was an illusion, only to find that her powers seemed to have deserted her entirely.

She felt curiously calm about this, as if it didn't matter that her greatest tool of defense was now gone. Given her current situation, she should have felt a desperate need for every advantage she could get, but the only emotion she was experiencing was the deep unease that her surroundings were inspiring in her.

She took a step forward, expecting to hear the floor creak, or at the very least, the sound of her footsteps on the ground. There was nothing. The absence of sound made her feelings of trepidation increase further. The sound was not muffled or made quieter in any way—there was just the utter absence of any feedback that she had taken a step forward.

There were too many options as to where to go. The foyer opened up on the wings to new rooms, and the stairs lead up to a whole new floor. El didn't have to think about it. There was something telling her that she was supposed to move forward, up the stairs. Whatever was off to the sides was interesting, but not for her.

She began to make her way up the stairs, keeping her hand on the wooden railing as she went. It was comforting to put her hand on something solid as she moved through this nebulous world. Or it should have been comforting. Instead, when her hand closed around the railing, it felt like an electrical pulse shot through her palm into the rest of her body. She paused, staring at the railing for a moment,

before continuing onward.

At the top of the stairs, she was faced with another carpeted floor, as well as two doors, one on each side of the landing. El looked to each one, her head moving slowly, her thoughts spinning in circles. It felt like walking through a dream and it was disorienting in the extreme.

Again, she didn't need to think about where she was supposed to go. She moved towards the left, trying to hurry, and finding it impossible. The same thing that was preventing her footsteps from making sound was also holding her to a slow walk, moving with unusual caution.

And then she was inside the room at the end of the hallway. She looked around, confused. She didn't remember opening the door. She didn't even remember putting her hand on the door knob.

The room looked like it belonged in a mansion. It was huge, the ceiling far above her head. There were windows on the other side of the room, massive windows that almost reached the ceiling. In between the two windows was a door that led to the outside. El could hardly make out what was on the outside, but from what she could see, it was dark out.

There was a fire place that was occupied by a roaring fire. Or what would have *been* a roaring fire had there been any sound. There were two chairs in front of the fire. One of them was occupied. El took an apprehensive step toward the occupied chair, feeling that whatever happened next was going to define her entire journey thus far. She swallowed hard, overly conscious of the lack of sound, then made her way to the empty chair.

Both chairs were a deep, dark red, almost the color of blood. She settled into the chair and then saw something strange. Despite the fact that she could tell what color the chair was, there *was* no color in the room. There was no color in the entire house. Everything was a varying shade of white, gray, or black. Despite this, she was still able to tell what colors everything was.

El had yet to turn her head to look at the person who was sitting in the chair next to her. It was something that she knew she needed to

do and yet felt too apprehensive to accomplish. As soon as she did it, the mystery would be over.

This wasn't the Watcher. This was something bigger than the Watcher. Something stronger and more important. Something less human, something bound by a different set of rules. The Watcher had only seen the ground open up and swallow her, transporting her here. It hadn't been responsible for it.

"You must be tired."

The voice was one of the strangest she had ever heard. The words were spoken normally, but each sounded as if it came from a different point in time. It sounded like someone had reached through time and plucked each word out individually, then stitched them altogether into one sentence.

El tried to turn her head—she wanted to see, she needed to see. But she could not see. Perhaps it was not her time yet. Instead, she just nodded. It was all she could think to do.

"Very few have made it this far. I know you have questions."

She did. She had more questions than she could think of, more questions than she could give voice to, even if she had an eternity to ask them. There was so much to learn. So much to understand. Her brain had still only barely been able to parse the information she had gleaned from merging with the Watcher. Now that she was no longer in a fight for her life, she was beginning to consider what she had seen.

The Watcher was not the only one.

It had been imprisoned.

It wanted to be free.

She understood the desire to be free better than anyone else—but she wasn't anything like the Watcher. She knew that.

"The Watcher was not the only one," the voice confirmed. "Very good."

Her next thought was one of panic. Was this voice, this being, another of the Watcher's kind? She didn't know if she could survive another confrontation like that.

"There is no need to worry," the voice told her. "Not here, in this place."

"When can I leave?" asked El.

"You can leave at any time," the voice said. "But wouldn't you like to stay?"

El had to admit that at this moment, she did want to stay. This was the closest she had been to answers. Even if the being's voice was unsettling and the knowledge may have been more than any human should know, she was too deep into his to walk away now. She needed to know.

"Look at me," the voice said. Each word came out stilted and slow, like the effort of picking the words from different spaces in time was monumental. "You can see both the past and the future."

El started to turn her head, preparing to catch a glance of the face of the man who was sitting in the chair. No—that wasn't right. It wasn't a man at all. It acted like a man and it sounded like a man, but even that was a stretch. It was more like an amalgam of ideas that made up a man, but didn't create the actual thing. That wasn't something that she wanted to see.

She returned her head to the original position she had kept it in. She stared ahead at the fire, feeling uncomfortable in her own skin.

"You shouldn't be afraid of the truth," the thing in the chair said. "There is so much to still know."

El knew that was true, but how much knowledge could she handle? Could the secrets of the world be worth whatever might happen after she learned them?

"The world you know is a dream of a dream."

El shook her head, trying to clear. This was... no. She didn't want to

hear this.

"The question you should ask is this: what is real?"

El squeezed her eyes tight and gripped the arms of the chair. "I'm real! My friends are real! Our world is real!"

"When did you learn that?"

When did she learn that? The answer was easy. She hadn't. She was just saying the only thing she could think to say, which was a blanket refusal of information she didn't want to hear.

"You fear nonexistence. You fear unreality. You fear this."

I do. I fear all of this. I fear dying; I fear losing. I'm afraid. I've been afraid for so long. I can pretend I'm not, but that's all it is. Pretending.

"Why are you so afraid?" the voice asked. "Look at me. Look on the past and the future. Give up your fear. *Change.*"

And so El turned and look, so quickly that she didn't have time to think about it. She was afraid that if she stopped to think about it, she would have changed her mind.

What she saw took her breath away. It wasn't frightening. It wasn't painful or nightmarish. But it was something that she would never be able to forget. It offered the promise of the future with the comfort of the past and it was countless faces at once. Just like the voice that came from the face, the being's visage was changing and jumping around in time. No part of its face matched up with the rest of it—each fraction was part of another face, some female, some male. Some young, some old. The only common feature was that none of it was the same.

She looked at the face but she could not tell if what she was seeing was the real face or only the way her limited mind was able to process what the face truly was.

"All of the past and the future can be seen at once if you turn the pages fast enough."

"Where am I now?" El asked. "How can I stop the Watcher?" Nothing that the voice was saying made sense. It all seemed far too abstract to be useful. None of it was relevant to the situation she was in.

"In between the pages," said the being. "Hard to imagine such a thing until you're there, isn't it?"

"You just keep asking me more questions," said El. She was beginning to grow impatient.

The being said nothing to her in response to this. Maybe because there was nothing to say to such a statement of the obvious. But if she couldn't leave this place without a method to stop the Watcher, then she didn't know what she was going to do. This many-faced thing that refused to speak in a manner that wasn't cryptic did not seem to be her enemy. But neither did it seem to be her friend. It was inhuman on a level that made it impossible for her to relate to it.

"All of existence is a question," came the reply. "Do you know what it is?"

El didn't respond. She was tired, so very tired, and she didn't want to have to run in circles any more. She wanted to go home.

"The question is, 'What happens next?' Would you like to see what happens?"

El wanted nothing more than to know what happened next. But... she found herself questioning the choice. If she knew what happened next, would that tell her what she needed to do? Or would she only see herself failing, without the knowledge that she still lacked?

"I just want to save my friends."

When it came down to it, it really was that simple. Yes, she would be saving the entire universe in the promise, but no matter what happened, she needed to make sure that her friends, the people she loved—her family—stayed alive. She already knew that she would never be able to sacrifice her friends, any of them, for whatever might be considered the greater good. She would find another solution, always.

"One day there will not be another solution," said the being.

Of *course* it could read her mind. She would have been surprised if it hadn't been able to.

"Then I'll just make one," she said defiantly, starting to feel more and more like her old self. The mysterious haze of this place had faded a little bit alongside the rise of her anger and frustration. It didn't matter *what* she was talking to. She wasn't going to let anyone tell her what she could or could not do.

"It does not matter what you *can* do. It matters what you *will* do. And what will you do? It isn't a question for anyone who has looked ahead."

"Then show me," said El. Her patience was gone and she was on the verge of losing her temper, something she was sure could not be a good idea under these circumstances.

"Finally," the being said, and it seemed to sigh and relax into the chair. "The end. At last."

And then El gasped as her pupils dilated and she saw... everything.

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There was so much to see. Some of it had already happened—things that she had already experienced. Her life in the lab. Her eventual escape. Meeting the party. Everything that entailed. But there was so much more. She saw the Watcher. She saw what it had been, where it had come from. She saw the chaos of the void, the shapelessness of the universe. She saw it collapse on itself—she saw the schism between chaos and order, the light and the dark. She saw how they were all the same, even while remaining separate. She saw the war and the collapse. She saw that there were more out there—watching from the outside of reality, waiting for their time to emerge.

She saw the wrongness of the universe she now lived in and she saw how despite the unnaturalness, she could never give it up.

She saw how it ended, all of it. She saw her final moments, and she smiled, because if that was how things would be, then that would be

okay.

Then she made sure she would never remember those futures, because she understood some things were never meant to be seen until it was time, and that time had not yet come. One day it would, and she would embrace it with open arms... but that day was still somewhere far over the horizon.

She saw herself, her future self, the one that she had spoken with. And her future self saw her too. They nodded and smiled, because they both knew, for their own reasons, that this moment was happening in the exact way that it needed to.

She looked deeper and she thought that there was a chance that she could see the being she was sitting next to, not in the strange combination of faces that it appeared to wear, but in its true form. It only took a moment of looking for her to withdraw her perception, because she had been right earlier—some things were not meant to be seen.

And then she was sitting back in the chair, staring at the fire that was roaring in front of her in its monochrome light. The being that had shown her everything was still sitting next to her, but was no longer saying anything in regards to what had occurred. It was no longer saying anything at all, in fact. El wondered if it had anything left to tell her after showing her so much of the future and past.

"Do you see now?" it asked. The voice was just as unsettling as it had been the first time she had heard it.

"I do," she said. And it was true. She had seen everything that she needed to see. She could end this, once and for all.

"Remember—never allow yourself to become lost in a memory."

El nodded. There was nothing left to see. Nothing left to say. She stood up from the chair and looked around, as the room began to disappear around her. "Thank you," she said.

The being did not react to her thanks, instead choosing to continue to stare into the fire. El closed her eyes and the mansion disappeared

from view entirely.

...

El stood in front of the Watcher. She could see it now; she could see what it really was. Before she had entered the mansion, she would have become a raving lunatic just by looking at it. Now, armed with the knowledge of the past and the future, she could stare at it unblinkingly, knowing that she would be able to lock it away, to keep it from the world and the people that she had grown to love.

It no longer spoke to her in words. Perhaps it had never spoken in words, that had just been how her inadequate mind had interpreted it.

There was no longer any need for words.

El raised her hand and unleashed the full extent of her power. Her mouth opened in a roar, but she couldn't hear herself over the sound of the world shaking itself to pieces around her. The Watcher threw itself at her, both in its true form and in the form that she had seen for so long. The tentacles closed around her, but she kept her hand up, feeling the world changing and reshaping, feeling the holes in reality that had been causing the gateways to open. She felt those holes seal over, closing up once and for all.

The Watcher filled her head with a furious roar, because it knew what was about to happen. El wondered if it knew how its downfall had been brought about, if it had seen her leave and enter the mansion. If it had seen how much she now knew of the world around her. She wondered if it was afraid, if it didn't understand how this girl had acquired so much knowledge and power. Did it understand that it was about to be trapped for the rest of eternity, with no hope of escape? Did it know that somewhere outside of reality, its fellow entities sat watching? Or was it just as in the dark as El had been in Hawkins lab?

She wondered these things, but she could not bring herself to care. Because completing this final task meant that her friends would be safe. Her family would be safe. Mike would be safe. And all would be right in their world.

Then there was no more time to wonder about anything, because the gates were closed, and the world had gone dark.

19. Chapter 19: The Aftermath

(A/N: After this, there's only one more chapter. Thanks for reading and reviewing!)

Mike,

I'm not so good at this. At saying goodbye. I wish I never had to. But sometimes, to do the right thing, you have to make hard choices.

I'm sorry I lied to you. I know you were going to tell Hopper when I was leaving so that he could come with me. I'm not mad. I almost wish that your plan would have worked, because then I wouldn't have had to go alone. I didn't want to go alone.

If I could have, I would have stayed here with you forever. You made me so happy, Mike. All of you did. When no one else in the world was going to be kind to me, you were. When I was just a stranger, a helpless, dirty girl with nothing, you gave me everything you had.

I had so much anger back then. But you taught me how to be kind, even when the world wasn't. Without you, I don't know what I would have turned into. Maybe I'd have turned into something like the Watcher. Just hate and anger at the world. Never getting to see all of the beauty.

I don't know what I'm walking into. It could be anything. It has to be a trap. And I don't know if I'm going to make it back. If I do, then hopefully I'll see you soon. If I don't, then I have a few things to ask you.

Please don't let this become your life. It isn't like last time. A year, or two, or three won't make any difference. Don't spend your life waiting. Know that the only thing I want for you is to be happy—and if that means slowly forgetting, I'm okay with that.

I know you must be stubbornly shaking your head and insisting that you will never forget, you will never give up. Because that's who you are. That's the Mike I love so much. But it's okay. You're allowed to be happy. That's why I'm doing this—because it's the only way to make sure that the people I love the most in the world are safe.

The second thing I need to ask you is to please take care of Hopper. I know he has Mrs. Byers, but I'm afraid of what might happen to him if I don't get back. He'll try to push you away—that's what he always does. You can't let him, even when he's being loud and scary. I know that's a lot to ask, but I know you can handle it.

There is so much that I wish I could say to you. I wish I could tell you how much I love you and how grateful I am for our time together. I wish I could list all the memories we made, and how happy they all made me. How they will be the first and last things that I think about when my battle begins. I wish I could stay safe here with you forever, and that we could live normal lives. I wish that we could just grow up and grow old and never stop laughing and having fun.

But I guess life isn't really ever that easy, is it? I spent a long time trying to think of what I was supposed to learn from all this. Eventually I realized that there wasn't anything to learn. That sometimes life just wasn't fair, and all you can do is make the best of it.

You were the best of it, Mike. You helped me find things that I never imagined.

I hope that I'll be back soon. But if not, you know what to do.

I love you.

Eleven

...

Mike had read and reread the note probably a dozen times by now, but he still couldn't bring himself to accept it. She couldn't have really left that like that, right? Without telling him? Without saying goodbye?

It was Christmas, but no one was celebrating. The Wheeler family was confused for the most part, because no one knew how to explain to them that El had left the dimension to battle an ancient evil. And so the party, alongside Hopper, Joyce, Steve, Nancy, and Jonathan, were all sitting in the living room, looking at a pile of wrapped and unwrapped presents, feeling miserable and not saying a word.

Finally, Hopper stood up and stormed out of the room. Mike's gaze followed Hopper out of the room. It took him a minute to work up the courage, but then he stood up and went after the police chief.

Hopper exited the house, slamming the door behind him. Mike slipped out after as soon as the door was closed, to see Hopper stomping across the lawn, head down.

"Chief!" Mike called. "Wait!"

Hopper whirled around. "Wait? For *what*? You had one job, kid! *One. Job.* And you managed to screw that up. She's not coming back now! Ever!"

Mike swallowed hard. Those were the exact thoughts that he was trying very hard to not think about. "We... we don't know that. Not yet. She might beat it. She could still come back."

"Are you out of your mind? You didn't see that thing like I did. *No one* could stand in front of it, not even her. Sorry, kid, but that's it! We're done!" Hopper's face wasn't red, which was how it usually looked when he got mad. More disconcertingly, it was entirely white. He looked like he was about to pass out.

Mike stopped for a second, unsure of what to say. When he started to speak, the words that came out didn't feel like his own. He wasn't sure if he had a death wish, and he couldn't say for certain that Hopper wasn't about to kill him.

"Shut up," said Mike. "You're wrong. I know how you feel right now, and guess what? We all feel the same way too. We're afraid for her, because we all love her. But I'm not going to give up just because she wasn't standing there waiting for us when we opened the door. And there's absolutely no reason that you should either."

Mike was afraid that he had gone too far and that Hopper was now literally going to kill him, but what happened was far more shocking.

Hopper stared at Mike in silence for a moment, and then, in a twist that Mike would have *never* predicted—Hopper began to cry.

"I can't lose her," he said. "She's my daughter. She's my girl. You have

no idea what it's like to lose someone that you're responsible for. Someone that you were supposed to be protecting. And then they're gone, just like that, and there was *nothing* you could have done about it. I can't let it happen again. It doesn't matter what I have to do, I can't let it happen again."

Mike didn't know what to say. He had never seen Hopper like this before, but the more he thought about it, the less he was surprised. Hopper loved El like no one else—that was why he had always been so overprotective and angry. Mike felt tears starting to come out of his own eyes, and he stood there on the front lawn and stared at the police chief, both of them crying.

Then Mike found himself moving without even meaning to, his legs propelling his body across the front lawn. A moment later and he was hugging Hopper while the two of them stood in front of the Wheeler house and cried. There was nothing else they could do now other than believe. All Mike could think about was the year after she had disappeared, how he had spent every day wondering if he would ever see her again, and he knew that he wouldn't be able to handle something like that again.

"She's going to be okay," Mike said when he finally separated from Hopper. Both of them were standing shakily, breathing hard, their eyes red and their faces tear-stained. "She has to be. She just has to be."

Hopper gave Mike a sad look. "You and I both know it doesn't work like that anymore. Maybe it never did, and we were just a bunch of fools who believed in something like that. It doesn't matter what we believe. Because we can't do anything to help her."

Mike's shoulders sagged. Hopper was right. There was nothing left for them to do besides sit and wait and hope. Mike understood why El had done it; he even understood why she put those things in the letter she had left him. But what he didn't understand was how he was supposed to just wait helplessly for something that might never happen. Considering where she had gone, who knew how long it could take her to get back? How was he supposed to give up hope when she could come barreling out of a dimensional portal at any minute? She hadn't even been gone for a whole day yet. It was too

early to give up, right?

Right?

"I just..." Mike's voice trailed off. Just because he had just exchanged a moment like that with Hopper didn't mean that the chief wasn't going to lose his temper over something Mike said.

Hopper's expression indicated that he knew Mike had held back on saying something, but surprisingly, the expression on the chief's face wasn't one of anger. Mike needed to remind himself that the animosity that Hopper used to hold towards him had since faded. "It's okay, kid," he said. "I know. You love her."

Mike blinked. He had not been expecting Hopper to say those words so calmly—or to even say those words at all. "You know?" he said, unsure of what else to say.

Hopper chuckled, but it was a sad, grim chuckle. "I've always known. Even when I thought you were no good, I knew. I'm overprotective, not blind, kid. And she could do a whole lot worse than you." He paused. "Could do better, but that's not really the point."

Mike almost laughed, but then he remembered how dire the situation was. "What do we do?" he asked.

"I don't know," said Hopper softly. "I don't know."

...

Christmas day passed soberly and quietly. Even the Wheeler family, who didn't understand what was going on, knew that something had happened and were staying out of the way of the party. It made for an awkward day, but the party, along with Joyce and Hopper, hadn't even noticed. They were far too busy discussing the situation in whispers.

Joyce was trying her best to keep Hopper calm, but even she was starting to feel hopeless. The whole situation felt like the last time Eleven had gone missing, and there had been nothing they could do then. She didn't see how this was going to be different. But even though she didn't have much for their situation, she needed to make

sure that no one else lost their cool—which meant she needed to keep it together for everyone else.

She tried to imagine how she would feel if Will went missing again. She knew that she would be losing her mind, tearing apart heaven and earth to find him. But this was different. There was no Hawkins lab, there were no government stooges to pressure. There was nothing other than a group of people in a room, trying to not break down entirely.

She knew better than to say anything to Hopper, because there was nothing she could say that would make the situation any better. She had no idea what he had talked about in the front yard with Mike, but whatever it had been, it had at the very least seemed to subdue the rage that Hopper had been wielding ever since they had learned the news from Mike's letter. Joyce had worried that Hopper was going to take out his anger on Mike, but it seemed that the opposite had occurred. As much as she cared about Hopper, that surprised even her.

She thought about El, about the horrors that she was facing all by herself. She thought about how alone the poor girl was, about how much she had already been through and about how unfair it was that she now needed to go through this as well. She thought about how this would shape all of their futures, how this could be the event that they never recover from.

She thought about how they would need to report El missing, because the world now knew that she existed. She thought about how that would hurt Hopper, and how this could very well be the thing that destroyed him.

She thought about all of these things and she felt despair, because there was nothing that she could do to make any of them better. Joyce would never give up, of course. She already knew that. But just because she had resolved to never give up didn't mean that she was going to be able to make a difference. She had heard what El was going against. This time was different.

Joyce looked around the room and felt a terrible sadness overcome her. This was a day that would change them for the rest of their lives,

no matter how it ended. She could only hope that it would end with the return of the girl that they had come to love so dearly.

...

El didn't come back that night. She didn't come back the next night or the night after that. With every day that passed, with every hour that passed, they all began to feel less and less confident that she would ever return.

Hopper had needed to file the missing person report. He hadn't said much about it, but Joyce had been able to tell just how hard it had been for him to do that. It had killed him to admit that his girl was gone again. She knew that he felt some level of personal responsibility, even though it wasn't really his fault. That didn't change the way he felt.

Hopper had descended into silence and solitude. She went to visit him almost every night now, but there was little to say. The worst part was that she couldn't really blame him. He had lost his family twice now. He had lost a daughter twice now. That was more than could be reasonably asked of any human being, twice over.

No one knew what to say or do. The party had gone back to school, but to most of them, it just felt like they were coasting through their days, sleeping with their eyes open. The joy in their lives was gone. It was like all the happiness had been sucked out in the vacuum that was El's disappearance, and none of them had seen it coming.

None of them could believe that their story was over, and that this was how it would end. With the disappearance of their friend and loved one. And it did feel like the end of a story. The portals were no longer opening. There were no more disturbances, as far as any of them could tell. It was a hollow victory. All they felt was a kind of emptiness, an emptiness stemming from the fact that the person who had bought them this victory was no longer with them. And with each day that passed, that person felt further and further away.

Time passed, as time does. It passed without noticing or caring about the small group of people whose lives had been torn apart by the experiments of a few men who thought they could control the

uncontrollable. Time passed, and nothing happened. There were no portals, no anomalies. There was nothing other than the same old Hawkins life, day in and day out, and as the days passed and the pages fell off the calendar, they all began to fall into the same sad routine.

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One Year After El's Disappearance

It was Christmas eve, but Mike didn't feel like sleeping. He hadn't slept well in over a year and he wondered if he would ever sleep well again. Not a day had gone by where he hadn't thought of her, despite what some people had told him. They had said that things would get better, that he would come to accept it over time. But he knew what had happened the first time El had disappeared, and he knew that it hadn't gotten better that time, either. Why should this be any different?

He was in his bed, staring at the ceiling, feeling more alone than ever. He turned on his side and looked at the shelf in his room. Sitting on top of it were the two Transformers that El had given him the prior year. He smiled to himself. She had been so proud. And he had been so honored. The gift had spurred him to watch the cartoon and he had to admit that being compared to Optimus, the big blue one, was a massive compliment. There was something else on the shelf, too. The letter that she had left for him before she had gone missing.

He had read it over and over, hoping to find some clue or some piece of information that he had missed, something that might have led him to her. But there was nothing. He knew he would be better off if he simply accepted that she was gone but doing that felt like betraying her. Mike believed in El. If she had won—and it seemed almost certain that she had—then she would be back. He wouldn't give up on her, even if everyone else had.

Which wasn't quite fair to say. No one had really given up, but it had affected them all differently. Most of them weren't willing to talk about it with Mike, which he was okay with. There wasn't too much else for him to say, and he didn't want anyone to be wasting their

time telling him that everything was going to be okay. Blanket assurances were meaningless to him and often just made him feel worse than he had before the conversation had begun.

Mike shook his head and sat up. He wouldn't be sleeping tonight, he could already tell. A year later and his mind was still spinning in circles—was she alone somewhere, scared and cold? Was she thinking about him right now? Or was she just gone forever, never to be seen again? He had no way of knowing.

Mike felt a sudden urge to get out of bed. There was no reason to just lay here tormenting himself. He felt overly warm and uncomfortable, despite the fact that it was near the end of December. Maybe stepping outside would clear his head. Not that it had been effective in the past, though.

Nothing seemed to work. He could only imagine how Hopper felt. Ever since El had vanished, Hopper barely left his house for anything other than work now, and when people saw him, he looked a mess. His eyes were always red and he seemed to stumble everywhere. He had hardly spoken to Mike at all in the past year, aside from a few very brief conversations. Hopper had always seemed subdued, and any trace at all of the old anger that he had always carried with him was entirely gone. For some reason, this made Mike feel even worse for the chief. It was like the loss of his adopted daughter had completely changed him as a person.

Mike slipped on a jacket and shoes and slipped out his front door as quietly as he could. He didn't want to wake anyone and then have to answer awkward questions. To the majority of the town, El was just a missing person—possibly a kidnapping victim or a runaway. They looked at Mike with pity, and he hated it.

He stood out on the front lawn, feeling like it had just been yesterday that he had been standing here with Hopper, feeling the crushing weight of the future on top of him. Mike looked up the sky, which was unusually clear. The moon was massive above him. It almost looked so close that if he reached out for it, he could hold it in his hands.

It wasn't supposed to be like this.

It should have gone differently. He should have been spending this Christmas with El. With the Byers family. With, yes, even Hopper. There had been a sort of respect and understanding that had formed between them. Mike had realized that Hopper only wanted the best for El, and Hopper had realized that Mike truly did care about El. And that kids would be kids, no matter how much adults wished otherwise.

Mike sat down heavily on the grass and continued to stare up at the sky. The world had seemed so full of possibility and mystery. They could have done anything, become anything? What would have El done with her life, had she still been here? She had still been in the process of discovering who she was and who she wanted to be. And now that was all taken away from her. Likely forever.

Mike understood that there were other people in the world who dealt with the same thing. That people died and people went missing and that was just a part of life. But why did it always have to happen to the people who deserved it least? El had been a *hero*. She had deserved something more than a victory that had left her with nothing.

"I miss you," he said up to the moon. In the past, not long after she had disappeared, Mike had tried to talk to her. He had imagined, or maybe just hoped, that somehow, she could hear him. Like Will had been able to interact with them when he had been in the Upside Down. He had tried everything—the walkie-talkie, lights, anything that he thought might have been useful in making contact across whatever barrier was separating him from El. But as the days turned into months without any results, he ceased these methods and began to do the only thing that was left to him—trust that she would make her way back. And he did trust that she would—if she was able to. But he also knew that if she was required to sacrifice herself, she would do it without a second thought.

"Some days I thought that maybe it would get easier, but that's not true, is it? It won't ever get easy. I'm just going to keep missing you, every day. And there might be a time in the future where I find a way to be happy, but it won't be real. Because in the back of my head, I'll always be wondering about you. Whether you made it. If you're out there somewhere, still thinking of me. I know you wanted me to

move on, but I think you must have known that was never going to happen." He lowered his head and looked at the ground. "I still love you, El. And I always will."

"Mike?"

A soft voice came from beside him. He thought, for the briefest of moments, that it had to be his imagination. Or perhaps that he was dreaming. Because hearing that voice, here and now, was impossible. He would recognize it anywhere, no matter how much time had passed.

He turned, and he could feel himself shaking. He was almost afraid to see who it was.

"El?"

She was looking at him with her eyes wide. She was taller and her hair was a little longer, a little wavier. She was older. He cursed himself for his stupidity. Of course she looked older! It had been a whole year!

"El, I don't understand."

The look on her face told him that she didn't understand either.

He stood up and the two of them just stared at each other, unsure of what to say to each other. He couldn't even begin to imagine what she had been through. She had been gone for a year, to the day. Maybe even to the hour and minute.

And then they couldn't hold back the flood of emotion, and Mike threw his arms around her, pulling her close to him and squeezing her as tightly as he could. "I missed you so much," he said, fighting past the overwhelming urge to burst into tears that currently overwhelmed him. He was struck by a sudden and very rational fear that what was happening was not real. That it was a dream or a trick of his imagination. Or worse, that it was a trick of some power like the Watcher, and that this was the first sign that she had failed at her mission.

Mike let go of her and stepped back, looking at her with uncertainty.

"How is this real?"

El looked down at herself and shook her head. "I don't know," she said. "But it's me. Mike, I swear it's me. Please believe me. Please."

Mike looked at her, and even though he could tell that she was now a year older, there was no doubt in his mind. It had to be her. He would recognize her anywhere, and there was no power in existence that could fool him when it came to her.

Mike pulled her close again, and now there was nothing he could do to stop the tears. "You're back," he said. "You're really back."

It felt like a dream, but there was no dream that could ever be this real. No illusion could ever make him feel this way.

El was shaking and Mike realized that she was crying too. Her sobs were wracking her entire body. There was so much that he knew she would need to tell him, but now was not the time for words. Instead, he simply held her and let her hold him. There would be time for explanations later.

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They stayed outside for a little longer after she had returned. Her reasoning was that she wanted to feel the ground under feet; she wanted to feel solid earth that she could trust. Yes, it was cold, but she hardly noticed that. Mike kept his arm around her as they sat on the front porch and tried to talk. She had so much to tell him, but she had no idea where to begin. For now, it was enough just to sit with him and be in the world, the world that she had feared she would never see again.

As far as she could tell, she had come back much later than she had left. It felt like the same temperature it had when she had made the decision to jump into the portal. It was the same time of year. But... Mike was so much taller. His voice was different. There were new Christmas decorations that had not been there when she had left. She had been terrified upon her reappearance that this was another illusion, but when she heard Mike speak, she knew this was the Mike that she had so grudgingly left behind. How much time had passed?

She was afraid to ask, but she could tell by the bags under his eyes and the way he looked at her that it had been a very long time indeed.

"What happened?" he said finally.

She opened her mouth to begin to tell the story but failed to find the words. She had seen so much. How did you begin to explain that to someone who had not been there? Mike would think she had lost her mind. And even if he didn't, he would never be able to understand. And some of it—she thought of some of the glimpses of the future she had caught—she didn't think anyone else needed to know until the time had come.

El shook her head. "I don't know how to tell you," she said finally. "I've never seen anything like it."

And I hope that I never do again, she thought to herself.

"Did... did you win?" Mike said. He seemed at a loss, and she could understand why. She hardly knew what to say.

"I think so," she whispered. After everything had gone dark, the next thing that she remembered was stepping back out of the same portal that had brought her to the realm of the Watcher. And she had been once again standing on Mike's front lawn. The next thing she needed to ask was the very thing that she was so frightened to bring up. "Mike... how long has it been?"

Mike looked at her then, but he paused before opening his mouth. She could imagine why. He was afraid to tell her.

"One year," he said, and his voiced stumbled over the last word.

El felt her temples throb and her pulse quicken. A year? How was that possible? It had been a few hours at most! They had been without her for a year? "Mike..." Her voice trailed off, because she couldn't think of what to say next. Should she apologize? Should she try to explain? Should she—?

Oh my God. Hopper.

She jumped up from where she was sitting. She didn't know where she how she was going to get there, but she needed to get to Hopper now.

Mike looked at her in alarm. "What is it?" he asked, his tone of voice indicating that he thought she might fall apart at any second.

"Hopper!" she said. "I have to see him! We have to get there!"

Mike looked around wildly, eager to comply, but not sure how he was going to accomplish driving them anywhere. He wasn't technically allowed to be driving yet, and while he could go wake up someone in his family, he didn't know if that was a conversation he wanted to have at this time of night. Then he seemed to reach a decision.

Mike stood up and glanced back at the house. "I'll be right back," he said, before slipping inside so fast that El hardly had a second to protest. For just a minute, she was alone on the front lawn. She knew that nothing would happen—she wasn't even sure if anything *could* happen anymore, now that the Watcher had seemingly been defeated. But even so, she didn't want to be alone. Not now, when so much was up in the air.

Luckily, she didn't have to wait long. Mike reemerged right away, holding something shiny and jingly in his hands. It took her a second to see what it was that Mike was holding.

Car keys!

Mike looked at the keys and then at El, and it was immediately apparent that he was nervous. "Only had a little practice doing this kind of thing," Mike said. "But how many people could possibly be on the road right now, anyway?"

El didn't care if Mike had never driven a car in his life. Right now *she* would have driven, and she didn't have the slightest idea how a car was supposed to work. It didn't matter. She needed to see Hopper, and she needed to see him now.

The two of them got into Mike's mother's car (they both knew better

than to touch Mr. Wheeler's). Mike looked at the steering wheel nervously, then put the key into the ignition and started the car. The car rumbled to life and only a moment later, pulled away from the house in the direction of where Hopper lived.

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The two of them stood in front of Hopper's front door. El stared at it, hesitating. As much as she wanted to see him again, she was also quite nervous to see how the past year had affected him. She knew all too well that it would not have been an easy time for him. She knew about his first daughter. And what had happened to his family after. She hated to think that she had put him through the same thing, all over again.

But she couldn't put it off together, and she missed him terribly. El reached out and knocked, hard enough to wake up anyone who might be sleeping inside. Then she stood there and waited, with Mike standing behind her. There was no response, and she almost went to knock again, but something told her not to. She knew Hopper, and she knew that he would need a moment to answer the door, especially when it was a day that he did not want to relive or remember.

Mike stepped forward and looked like he was about to suggest that El knock again, but she shook her head to stop him before he even got the words out. It was the right decision. Because just after Mike stepped back to return to his spot, the door creaked open, and standing in the doorway was Hopper.

His eyes were red and he looked wildly disheveled. There were huge dark circles under his eyes and he looked as if he hadn't even been asleep to begin with. He looked like he hadn't been asleep for quite some time.

Hopper stared at her, and the light of recognition was missing from his eyes. He was looking at her, but it was like he was seeing someone else.

"It's me," she said, after a moment passed.

And then Hopper's eyes changed. His face softened and his mouth fell open the smallest bit. "El?"

"It's really me," she said, and she could already feel herself crying.

Hopper pulled her close to his chest, a look of disbelief on his face. He was crying too, tears pouring down his face. "I don't understand. How...? You were..."

"I'm back," she said. "I promise. I'm never going to go away ever again. I want to live with you. I want to be your daughter."

Hopper was crying so hard now that he could barely speak. "Of course. Anything." He wanted to say more—he even tried to say more, but nothing came out. All he could do was stand there and cry, holding the daughter he had thought gone forever.

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Minutes later, and they were sitting in Hopper's living room. Mike was on the other side of the room, sitting in a recliner, doing his best to pretend he wasn't there. Hopper and El were sitting next to each other on the couch, and El was doing her best to explain where she had been. The things she had seen. Hopper only understood the slightest fraction of what she was saying, but he didn't care. She had made it back, and that was the only thing that mattered to him. She was safe.

Hopper had spent the past year in what felt like hell. Every day was the same. He spent the required hours at work—not that anything ever happened in Hawkins after the paranormal ended. And after leaving work, he spent the rest of the night drinking and searching for any sign of what might have happened to her. As the days turned to weeks and the weeks turned to months, he gave up any hope of finding her. But he never stopped looking. Because even though he knew he would never find her, he couldn't do *nothing*. He just never imagined that he would see her like this.

She was taller, older. She had been gone a year, and she had aged a year. But for some reason, her story made it sound like she had only been in that other place for a few hours. Her story was unbelievable

—but Hopper could tell that she had left part of her story out. The story was disconnected enough to begin with, but there were large swaths of the narrative that just weren't there. Hopper had a lot of experience picking out when people were lying, and he knew that El wasn't telling them everything. The truth was that he didn't care. She was back, she was safe, and she had done what she needed to do. It was over.

"Where was it?" asked Mike.

Hopper jerked his head towards where Mike was sitting. Truth be told, he had forgotten that the kid had even been there, the story had been that engrossing. It was a good question though.

El looked at her boyfriend and then at Hopper. She shook her head. "I don't know. Not everything. It felt like I was in-between. In-between everything. In the cracks between places. I saw so much. I think... I think I saw everything."

Hopper's head hurt a little, and it wasn't from the copious amounts of alcohol he had been drinking to try and get himself to sleep. "Kid... I don't care where it was. All that matters is that you're here. And you put that son of a bitch away forever."

El smiled weakly, looking like she was going to burst into tears again. Hopper, without thinking, put his arms around her again. "It's going to be okay, kid. We're all going to be okay."

And for once in his life, he actually believed it.

20. Chapter 20: The End

That Christmas was everything they had wished the previous Christmas to be. Yes, Mike, El, and Hopper barely had any sleep (mostly because they were too afraid to close their eyes and miss a moment with each other), but coffee was enough to solve that problem. Because first thing on Christmas morning, they needed to show everyone that El had made it back. She had returned.

There had been no plans that day other than for each of the party to be with their families. El's disappearance had done something strange to them. They were still friends, because nothing would ever be able to fully take that away from them. But they smiled a little less. They joked a little less. They spent more time alone and more time thinking about things had changed and how they would never be the same.

Mike made the phone call. He called every member of the party, one by one, to tell them that he needed to see them, and he needed to see them right away. They had all responded with the expected concern. Most of them seemed to think he was deeply struggling with the anniversary of the disappearance. He wanted to just tell them on the phone, but that didn't feel right to him.

None of them argued, even though he knew that some of them might have a hard time excusing themselves from their family Christmas celebration. The fact that they all agreed so readily was proof of the strength of their bond and friendship.

They all agreed to meet at Mike's house, as soon as they could. Mike had tried to explain the situation to his mother, but that had been a strange conversation. She had been utterly furious about the theft of her vehicle, and only slightly mollified when told that Hopper had been aware of the entire situation. Mrs. Wheeler had been confused—El was back? Who had found her? Mike didn't know how to explain, and Hopper had needed to do most of the talking. In the end, he explained everything without explaining anything. But all his years of administrative doublespeak had trained him in the mystical art of BS. Even if his behavior over the past year had not exactly earned him the goodwill of most of the people in the town.

Now, Hopper, El, and Mike were waiting for everyone to show up. Mike assumed Mrs. Byers was going to be there, as well. Hopper had made that call, and even though Mike hadn't been able to hear most of the conversation, he had heard the tone, and he had heard the tears. Seeing Hopper cry like that was strange, but Mike wasn't surprised. Watching Hopper, one of the strongest people Mike knew, fall apart like that over the last year had been so hard to watch. The only reason Mike could imagine how hard it had been for the chief was because it had been equally hard for Mike.

It wasn't long before they were all there. No one could believe what they were seeing. The reaction was universal. Mrs. Byers was in tears, hugging El and Hopper in turns, so emotional that she could barely speak. Will was ecstatic, having never really given up on her. He knew that you could survive anything, if you just wanted it bad enough. And if you had people who still believed in you. Lucas and Dustin were shocked, but immensely proud. Their best friend had kicked the ass of an elder god. Max was beaming, because she had known, deep down, that if anyone was tough enough to take on the end of the world like that, it was her best friend.

El tried to explain what had happened, but the truth was that she didn't think it was a good idea for them to know too much. Oh, she told them the broad strokes. She told them what things had looked like. But there was a substantial difference between what things looked like, and how things actually were. Some things were not meant to be known, and El was beginning to see that her time spent behind the curtain of reality was something she would need to carry by herself throughout the rest of her life.

She thought of the things that she had seen, of the things that she had learned. It wasn't over yet. Sure, it might be over for now. But there was a whole universe out there, an entire reality that had seen her handle the Watcher. The Watcher was not the only one of its kind. And she didn't know what the others would do. There was a chance, of course, that they would do nothing. That they would be content to exist in their own realities, leaving hers to itself. Maybe they had seen what she had done to the Watcher and would know better than to try something.

But there was no way for her to know. There was no way to make the

thoughts and plans of extradimensional gods make any kind of sense. Even though she had seen what was very likely the future, and talked to herself and Mike, she didn't think that anything was guaranteed. It was so easy for something to change in the blink of an eye—a whole year could go by without you ever even noticing.

She tried not to think about what it must have been like for her friends. For Hopper. She had to keep telling herself that it wasn't her fault, that she had done what she needed to do and that in the end, it had all been worth it. But she couldn't shake the sight of seeing him in the doorway of his house, looking alone and exhausted. The past year for him must have been just as hard as her odyssey into the unknown. She knew that it would be a long time before Hopper was okay again. Maybe that was alright. Because it would be a long time before she was okay again, too.

"So what happens next?" asked Max, and that was the question that was on everyone's mind.

El wished that she knew the answer to that. There was no guide to this and she didn't know what would happen. Maybe nothing would happen. Maybe they would have to go through it all again and again, until she died, was consumed, or there were no longer any entities left.

She shook her head. "I don't know," she said. "But I don't think that it's coming back." And that was all that she could say with any certainty.

Mike was looking at her with such pure joy that El felt like her heart would burst. She wished that she could tell him what she had seen—that there was a future where they stayed together, and that she had seen it. But... what if she told him, and that made sure the future never happened? She didn't want to risk that and so no matter how hard it was, she knew that she needed to make sure she kept those moments to herself.

Lucas was still shaking his head in disbelief. "I can't believe that you went up against a god," he said. "I mean, I can believe that you won. Because you're *El*. But still... you know how crazy this is?"

El smiled. "Yes, Lucas, I know how crazy it is."

Lucas kept shaking his head. "Good, because it is *crazy*. This is going to make an amazing story one day."

Hopper raised an eyebrow. His voice was still a little hoarse from all the crying he had been doing (not in front of anyone else, of course). "Except she's never going to tell anyone about this because we don't want her getting any attention that she doesn't need."

While the sentence was true, it also had a sobering effect on the group. They could all imagine what it would be like if another government agency caught wind of El's encounters. It would likely start the entire cycle over again.

"So let's make a promise," said Mike. "We never talk about this again with anyone who doesn't already know. We can't risk it. Who knows what they would do if they found out? If the Russians found out?"

Hopper nodded his approval. "And maybe one day, all you kids can leave this place behind."

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Christmas happened that year, and it was the most joyous celebration that anyone could remember. The last year had been so difficult on all of them, and El's return felt like the lifting of a monumental weight. Even people who had no idea what the truth of the story was were celebrating. The town felt lighter—like a darkness had been hanging over them and was now lifted. To some degree, that was true. The Watcher's influence was gone, most likely forever.

To others, the return of El marked the end of an era. The end of the strange disappearances that had plagued the town, seemingly out of nowhere. It was like a return to normalcy, the way things should have been all along.

Mike was happy to spend time with his family, but what he really wanted was some alone time with El. Just to sit and talk. He couldn't stop watching her and he had to keep reminding himself that this wasn't a dream, that she really was back and she wouldn't be going

anywhere. Maybe she would be able to stay for good.

Finally, after what felt like an eternity, most of the celebration had ended and people started to disperse. Mike and El bundled up the best they good, and stepped outside to sit on the front lawn. There was no snow this year. It didn't feel like last year did. It didn't feel like a storybook anymore. It felt more like real life.

"What's happened?" asked El, as they sat down on the ornate bench that Mr. Wheeler had put out one weekend on their lawn.

Mike looked at her, confused by the question. "What do you mean?"

"Over the last year. What did I miss?"

Mike was at a loss. How was he supposed to answer that question? There was so much...

"Well, Hopper and Mrs. Byers are still together. Good thing, too. I don't know how he would have handled it without her. Lucas, Max, and Dustin... well, they're the same as always. I mean, we've all been worried. We talked about you a lot at first—about what we thought you were doing. But things were hard, you know? Eventually we stopped talking about it because we were all just said. I never stopped believing that you were out there, though. I knew it was unlikely... but I'd seen you survive so much. I didn't think that something like an elder god was going to take you down. You're way tougher than that."

El smiled. Mike always knew what to say, even when he had no idea what he was supposed to say. "What else?" she asked.

Mike looked thoughtful. "Steve... he started taking classes at the community college. I think he really changed, you know? Dustin and him still hang out all the time. And I think that's really good for both of them. Oh, and since the Byers moved back here and live in Hawkins again, Jonathan and Nancy are still together. And I think that was really good for her too."

El nodded, smiling. It seemed that in her absence, the world had kept spinning. She supposed that shouldn't have surprised her, but it still

felt strange. A whole year? She hadn't even had time to fully take in how *she* had changed. It wasn't possible, and yet it had clearly happened. She wondered if there was something she had forgotten. Could it be that she had experienced an entire year and forgotten it all?

No, that couldn't have happened. It must just have been the effect of the other dimension. Right?

The more she thought about it, the more her head hurt. And it wasn't like she was ever going to be able to get an definitive answer from someone.

"Were you... okay?" El asked. It was the thing she had worried about the most, aside from Hopper's well-being.

Mike looked at the ground. "It was hard. But I guess... I was okay. I wish you would have told me, El."

She looked at him and felt a wave of guilt. Maybe she should have told. But she knew that if she had...

"You would have convinced me not to go," she said sadly. "I had to. You know that, right?"

Mike nodded. "I knew why you did it. I just wish... a year is a long time, El."

"I'm sorry," she said, feeling guiltier than ever.

Mike shook his head then. "You don't have to apologize to me. Never apologize for doing what you have to do. Not to me and not to anyone else. I never blamed you for anything. I was sad, and I missed you every day. But I knew that you were out there, doing whatever it was that you needed to do. And, yeah, I knew that there was a chance you wouldn't make it back. But that was the risk we all took, every time we went up against this stuff. The demogorgon. The Mind Flayer. The Russians. Any of it—we all knew what might happen. And we were all willing to make that sacrifice. I'm not trying to make you feel bad. I just want to be honest with you."

El leaned her head on Mike's shoulder and sighed. It wasn't a

frustrated sigh or a sad sigh. It was a relieved, relaxed sigh. It felt like it had been ages since she had been able to sit down and just breathe. Maybe it had been.

"Do you think that it's really all over?" asked El.

Mike looked up the sky. "I don't know," he said, after a moment. "Is there really any way to know? It might be over for today. It might be over for all next year. It might be over for decades. But it could come back one day too, right?"

El knew he was right. It had been just what she had been thinking. "And if it does," she said, "I'll be there to stop it."

"We'll be there," said Mike. "All of us. You won't have to face anything alone. Even if we can't go with you, we'll be here for you, no matter what."

"Promise?" asked El, even though she already knew what the answer was going to be.

"Promise," said Mike with a smile. "You can always count on me."

Missing a year of her life was a frightening thought, but the more she considered it, the more she saw ways to see it a good sign. Before escaping the lab, she had never even had a life. Over a decade had gone by where she had barely even been a person. If she would have missed a year during that time, she probably wouldn't have even noticed. But now that she had an actual life, a year was a massive gap for her. She supposed that she could be grateful for the fact that she even had a reason to miss all of that time.

El pulled herself closer to Mike and allowed herself to relax. It was Christmas. There was no need to be thinking about these kinds of things right now. Maybe there wouldn't be any need to think about them ever again.

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And then, things seemed to fall into a new kind of normal. It was strange—for as long as El could remember, even in the calmest moments of her life, there had always been something happening.

Either it was in the background or it was looming on the horizon, but it was always there. Now, there was nothing. They were still on break for holidays, and she knew that returning to school would bring its own set of challenges. But they were challenges that she could look forward to without having to fear them. They were challenges that everyone her age faced.

In a way, it felt like she had never left. Sometimes things felt the same way they did before she had gone on her odyssey. It was only when she looked in the mirror or saw her friends' faces that she remembered how much they had changed.

Hopper had his work cut out for him when it came to explaining her return. In the end, it came down to lies, the same way it always did. The press, as usual, tried to hound him for details, but he presented the story the same way, every time. A private detective, who Hopper refused to name to protect the individual's privacy, had followed several leads and located El before everyone else. No arrests were made because the leads had run cold. There were plenty of questions, because the situation seemed sketchy to everyone, but no one could prove anything that Hopper was saying false.

No matter what happened, Hopper made sure that none of that blew back on El. She didn't need any more stress in her life, and he refused to let those parasites get after her. Eventually, they would lose interest, but for now, he had his work cut out for him.

El was grateful for the peace and quiet. All she wanted to do was spend time with Mike and her friends. Which was exactly what she was doing on the day they made the promise. They were at the gorge, all sitting in a circle, listening to El tell her story.

El had gone into a little more detail as to what had happened when the adults weren't there. Yeah, she trusted and loved Hopper and Mrs. Byers, but they weren't part of the party. Neither was Steve or Nancy or Jonathan. There were some things she only wanted to tell her closest friends.

The party was staring at her, eyes wide. They, like her, only had the barest comprehension of what she had seen. It was all so otherworldly. "So you think that it might happen again?" asked

Dustin, eventually.

El shrugged. "I don't know. I don't think the Watcher will ever come back. I don't think it can, after that. But I do know that there are other entities out there."

"Are they evil?" asked Lucas. "Are they going to try the same thing?"

"I don't think that good and evil mean anything to them," said El slowly. "Not in the same way that those words mean things to us. They don't think like we do. They might not even think at all."

"What do we do if it happens again?" asked Will. "If the Watcher *does* come back or if more of them appear?"

Mike looked up and addressed the whole party. "We'll have to stop it. It might not happen this year. Or next year. It might not happen for a decade or more. But there's no one else here that knows how to deal with these things. And if it happens again... we have to stop it."

The party looked around at each other, all of them nodding in agreement.

"We have to swear," said Mike. "No matter where we are, or who we've become. We have to come back so that we can finish what we started."

"What are we all going to do against a group of gods?" asked Lucas. "I mean, realistically? I don't mind coming back, but what good will we do?"

El smiled. "None of this would have happened without all of you. We're all the party. It's not just me."

Dustin stood up. "Well, I'm with you. No matter what the rest of these mouth-breathers say or do, I'm with you. How could I not be?"

One by one, the rest of the party stood up. Lucas was the last to do so, but he didn't really hesitate. None of them did. Not only did they owe their lives to her, they all considered her one of their best friends. And they would never let her down, no matter how much time had passed.

They all put their hands into the circle. "We'll come back," said Mike. "No matter what. If it starts again, if the portals open up, we will come back. And we'll make sure that it's gone for good."

Dustin looked around. "Should we like... make a blood pact now or something?"

Max gave Dustin a disgusted look. "What? Are you out of your mind? Why would I want your gross blood on me?"

Dustin shrugged and looked offended. "A simple no would have been enough, thank you very much."

The party stood there in the circle, under the sun, on the edge of the gorge, and they felt something strange happening. It wasn't anything tangible, nor was it anything malicious. It was something that happened to everyone, something that must happen to all of us. It was inevitable.

They felt themselves growing up.

To El, it was the most frightening thing she could think of. She had even less experience in the world than the rest of the party did, and she didn't know if she was ready for all the changes that were coming in the future. As the party let their hands fall, she gripped Mike's. Whatever was coming, they would face it together. Even if it was something as horrifying as the end of high school and the beginning of adulthood.

Somehow, they would weather the storm. Growing old would be the most difficult challenge they had faced together, but it was one that she could look forward to. Whatever the future brought them, they would face it together.

...

Hopper felt like he could breathe for the first time in a year. He had never expected to feel this level of relief again in his life, and it had been practically killing him. Every day had broken down into the horrid routine that ended in the same way: no news about El. It had crushed him, even though he knew better than to expect anything

other than that.

There were no experts on this. The real experts on this were the kids, Joyce, and himself. And they didn't know anything other than what El had told them. It had been over. The only hope was that El was going to reappear, but with every day that passed, that hope had grown smaller and smaller. Until it was gone entirely.

Hopper was certain that without Joyce, he never would have made it. It was the same cycle of grief that had almost claimed him when Sara had died. Joyce hadn't been able to pull him out of it, but she had been able to keep him above water. Yeah, he had been drinking way too much. Maybe taking a few too many pills. But he was alive. And in the end, that was all that had mattered.

When El had appeared on his doorstep, he had thought that it was a hallucination. There was no reason for her to be there, a year after she had disappeared. That was why, for the first few seconds after he saw her, he hadn't reacted, because he had expected her to vanish at any moment.

Ironically, Mike was the one who had made it all real to him. There was no way that kid would have been in a hallucination. He was just a constant reminder of what Hopper had lost, and even though it wasn't Wheeler's fault, Hopper couldn't help but resent the kid a little.

And then it had clicked. This was her. It was really her. His girl was back. His daughter was safe. Hopper wasn't able to do anything than stand there and cry, letting a year's worth of emotions come pouring out of him.

So now, Hopper was making himself a drink. But there wasn't a drop of alcohol in it. He was making coffee, and he was even making it decaf, because it was getting a little late. Joyce would have been proud of him. Joyce *would* be proud of him when she made it here later, since she was on her way. Hopper knew just how much she had worried about him for the past year. The truth was that he couldn't blame her. As much as he didn't want to admit it, there had been some damn good reasons to be worried about him. The clarity that El's reappearance had brought him had showed him all the mistakes that he had made in the time she was gone. He was ashamed and he

hoped that El never learned the truth of how far he had gone.

There was a knock on his door, and it brought a smile to his face. He knew who it was without having to open the door. The knock was the same every time, and lately, it only came as an announcement that the person on the other side was about to come in. Sure enough, just the briefest of moments later, and the door opened.

"Hop? It's me," called Joyce from the front door.

Hopper finished pouring his coffee and stepped into the hallway to see Joyce.

"Hey," he said, taking a sip.

She looked at him with disapproval. "Coffee? Really? At this time?"

Hopper raised his mug to her. "It's decaf. And it's better than anything else that I might be drinking at this time of night. Anyway, what are you, my mother?"

Joyce shook her head as she approached him to give him a kiss on the cheek. "You could be drinking water."

Hopper grimaced. "Do I really strike you as someone that boring?"

"No, but you strike me as someone who could stand to be more hydrated."

Hopper rolled his eyes as they walked together to the living and sat down on his couch together. Despite it being yet another long day in a career that seemed full of them, Hopper felt energized. He felt like his life was changing for the better.

"Is El home?" Joyce asked.

Hopper shook his head. "Nah. She's out with her friends. And Wheeler."

"And you just let her go?" Joyce asked teasingly.

Hopper shrugged. "She's old enough to make her own decisions."

Joyce looked a little surprised. "What brought about this sudden change?"

Hopper had to think a little to answer that one, because it *did* seem sudden. The answer was obvious though, even if it was hard to admit. "You know what it was? I made a mistake. I should have listened to you from the start. And then I got trapped on the other side and I started thinking about what was really important. And then El vanished. And I realized that I should have done so many things differently. Maybe it shows that I'm weak, since she had to reappear for me to realize these things. But at least I did realize them. At least I changed."

"I don't think you're weak," said Joyce. "I think you're human."

"Isn't that just another way to say weak?" asked Hopper with a grin. "It's okay. I know who I am. At least I have that much."

"So what comes next?" asked Joyce. "For you? And for El?"

Hopper looked thoughtful. "I don't know. Maybe that's the most exciting part about this all. There's a future there, for both of us. She's so smart. She's going to finish high school and I think she's going to go to college. I have no idea for what, but I know she's going to do something amazing."

"And you're just going to let her grow up and go to college?" teased Joyce. "That seems like a stretch to me."

Hopper grinned. "Yeah, yeah. Laugh it up. I'm telling you, I learned. I'm not saying that it's going to be easy, but I'll work on it. She deserves it."

"She really did save the world," said Joyce with a sigh of wonder. "Can you believe it? Did you ever think that you were going to see your daughter do something like that?"

Hopper smiled wistfully. "No," he said, and there were many emotions in his voice. "No, I didn't. Not for a very long time."

Joyce covered her mouth with her hand. "Oh! Hop, I'm sorry, I forgot
—"

Hopper cut her off before she could say anything else. "It's okay, Joyce. You're right. After Sara, I never gave myself the change to even hope for something like this. I just didn't allow myself to even think about it. And look what happened once I made room in my miserable life for it. I've got El. I've got you. I have the rest of those damn kids. And I feel something I never thought I would feel again: happy."

Joyce looked at Hopper, and her eyes were shining. He wasn't sure if they were shining with tears or with happiness. Maybe it was both. "I love you, Hop," she said.

Hopper felt his heart come to an abrupt stop and his stomach do a flip. He hadn't felt that feeling a very, very long time. He couldn't recall with certainty when was the last time he had felt that. It wasn't fear. It was something far stranger to him.

"I love you too," he said, and he found that he truly meant it. Imagine that? Jim Hopper, the eternally alone, in love with someone.

He put his arm around her then, and the two of them just sat there in silence. It was a comfortable sort of silence. There was nothing else that needed to be said. Their journey had been long and strange, and Hopper knew that this was only the beginning. No matter what happened, they would face it together.

"Here's to the future," he said, lifting his mug of coffee. "Here's to whatever comes next."

...

It was New Year's Eve, and Hopper was throwing a party for El and her friends. It had come as a huge surprise to her that he would be willing to do such a thing, since he really didn't seem like the type to enjoy a New Year's celebration. He had acted like he was offended by her surprise, but then he had laughed and explained himself.

"It really is a new start," he said. "Why shouldn't we celebrate?"

And then he had hugged her tightly. El understood perfectly after that.

Mike had been shocked too. "Hopper is inviting *me* over to spend New Year's Eve at your house?" he had asked in disbelief.

El had giggled. "Well, yeah, but he's inviting the whole party too."

"That's a relief," Mike had said. "I was beginning to think he didn't hate me."

It was a joke, of course. Hopper didn't hate Mike. Honestly, Hopper had probably *never* hated Mike. He had hated what Mike had represented. He hated the thought of El growing up and changing. But he had learned, and now he was able to look at Mike with a little more kindness. Only a little, but still. It was something.

The party was going great, from El's perspective. Hopper looked a little stressed out—this was the most people that had been in his house in a very long time... maybe forever. But he was handling it well, El thought. Even when she leaned in to give Mike a kiss, Hopper's face only got a little red.

El was happier than she could ever remember being. All of her friends were here, Hopper was smiling and in a good mood, Mrs. Byers was in her element. There was nothing else she could ask for. She could think of no better way to ring in the New Year.

"Any resolutions for next year?" Mike asked with a smile.

El made a show of being thoughtful. "Hmmm..." she said. "I have to think about that one."

"C'mon," Mike said. "It can't be that hard! What do you want to improve in your life for next year?"

"Well," said El. "I think I have an idea." She grinned mischievously.

"Spill!" demanded Mike.

"I'd like to not go missing this year," said El, laughing. "I think that would be a pretty good goal for myself."

Mike smiled, but it was a little bit of a pained smile. "That's not very funny," he said.

"Then how come you're smiling?" asked El, poking him.

"It's a little funny," said Mike.

The two of them were sitting down on Hopper's couch, while the party occurred around them. Dustin was telling some crazy story about science camp and how much fun it had been to see Suzie again and how in love they were. Everyone else was a little skeptical about it, but they were happy to hear his story and to see how thrilled their friend was.

"Want to step outside for a minute?" Mike asked El.

El glanced at Hopper, who was currently involved in a conversation with Joyce. El nodded, and the two of them sneakily got off the couch, slipped into their coats, and left the front door and the rest of the party before anyone noticed.

Outside, the night was chilly, but it was far from unbearable. The moon was huge and shone down on the two of them, like a nighttime sun.

They sat down on the front step and looked up at the moon. Mike reached out and took El's hand, and she felt her heart skip a beat.

"It's been a crazy couple of years, huh?" asked Mike.

El nodded. "That's an understatement."

"You think we're going to have a couple of years away from the craziness now?" Mike asked.

El wished that was the case, but she knew better than to assume anything like that would ever happen in her life. "Who knows?" she said.

Mike sighed. "Yeah. Who knows."

He was silent for a moment, long enough for El to prompt him. "Why did you want to come out here?" she asked him.

"Because I wanted to talk to you," Mike said. "Away from everyone

else. I wanted to talk about us. I wanted to talk about how I feel about you."

El smiled encouragingly at Mike.

"I love you," said Mike. "I know I've told you that before. I've told you that a lot. And we've talked about that a lot in the past. But I don't think I ever really knew what it meant. We both didn't. I might not know what it means right now, honestly. Maybe it'll take years to figure out what that means. All I know is that it's true. That I do love you and that I don't care how long it takes, I want to spend all that time with you. I want you to be able to live the life you deserve. And I want to be able to live that life with you."

El felt tears in her eyes, but they weren't tears of sadness. Her heart was so full it felt like her chest might burst.

"I know we're young," said Mike. "And no one thinks we know what we're talking about, but we've seen more things than most people will see in their entire lives. I hope we get to see even more. And I hope we get to see them together."

The tears were running down El's face now, and there was nothing she could do to stop them.

"Yes," she said, when she finally gained the ability to speak. "I want that too. I love you, Mike."

She leaned in and kissed him before he had the chance to react. There was a lot in that kiss. There were years of frustration and pain; there were mountains of sadness. There was all their accumulated loneliness and loss.

There was the promise of the future.

Neither of them knew what they were going to face. It would be hard—growing up, becoming adults. Finding a future for themselves. They would face challenges that they had never imagined. They would see things that they could have hardly dreamed of.

And they would do it together.

As the moon climbed higher in the sky, and the clock ticked closer to the New Year, the couple sat and held each other. Whatever happened, they knew there was one thing they would never lose:

Each other.

The End

(Author's Note: Thank you to everyone who came along on this crazy journey with me. When I started writing this, I never thought that it would grow into something of this scope. Nor did I imagine this many people would be reading it. But here we are, at the end. One day, there might be more to this story... after all, there are a lot of other entities out there beyond the Watcher. But if that story is ever told, it's still far away at the moment. I enjoyed every moment I spent with these characters, and I hope you did too. Thank you for reading and for reviewing, and make sure to follow my author page if you want to know if I ever return to this story. If anyone is interested in working with me or has any thoughts or suggestions, feel free to PM me.)